



Social media as an alternative voice for the social movements: Exploring the opportunities and challenges of alternative media in the digital age.

**BY**

**JABULANI NKUNA**

**(216076183)**

**Submitted to the School of Arts, College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal, in fulfilment of the requirements of Doctor of Philosophy in Media and Cultural Studies (2023)**

**Supervisor: Dr Anusharani Sewchurran**



## **DISSERTATION TITLE**

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As the candidate's Supervisor, I agree to the submission of this dissertation:

Dr A. Sewchurran:

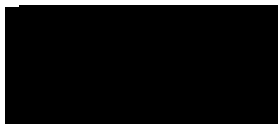


## Declaration

I, **JABULANI NKUNA (216076183)**, declare that:

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Date: 29/08/2023

Place: Pretoria

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family. Their support and prayers kept me going during the research journey. To my wife, Olivia, Ndzi khensa swikhongelo swa wena naku ni seketela hi minkarhi hinkwayo. To my kids Mfanelo, Voninga and Hitsakile I hope this will inspire you to dream big in life. To my parents, Alinah and William Nkuna, I thank you for laying a solid foundation and encouraging me to go to school during difficult times. You never allowed our disadvantaged background to dictate our fate. Today, we are celebrating because of your efforts. To my siblings, Molly, Casper (RIP), Cyril and Matimu, I also thank you for your support.

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Mina Nkuna wa Mavutani ndzi khensa ni vuyelala.

## **Abstract**

Social media has evidently revolutionised communication, giving end-users the freedom to produce and consume media products. This has been evident in recent social movements such as the Arab Springs, Occupy Wall Street, and the Fallist movement. Whilst various social movements have embraced social media to communicate their alternative discourses, the extent to which social media serves as an alternative media for social movements is underexplored. This dissertation critically analyses the pitfalls and potentials of social media, such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* as alternative media. The theoretical basis of this study is located within the critical theories of the network society, critical political economy, the public sphere, and the post-colonial theory of subaltern.

The findings reveal that social movements have adopted social media to communicate their discourses, challenge the dominant narrative, and set the news agenda. Whilst social media is an important medium of communicating their discourses, this study also observed that the discourses of social movements on social media are undermined by low engagement rates, digital divides and rapid commodification of culture. The study also found that social media ownership is ideologically counterposed to social movements that subscribe to subaltern politics. The capitalist owners' desire to make money has led to re-circulating the ideas that affirm the place of the dominant in society. Social media tend to use algorithms to prioritise entertainment, celebrity lifestyles, conspicuous consumption and in some instances social media can be used to influence the political decisions of the masses. This effectively means that whilst the social movements have done well to create an alternative space for their community, the potential to counterbalance the force of power is still determined by dominant members of society who also set the agenda for inclusion and exclusion. In this case, the study proposes a blended approach in which social movements integrate new and traditional media to tell their stories to the general populace.

**Keywords:** Social media, alternative media, social movements, subalterns, alternative discourses, hegemony, dominant ideology

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## List of acronyms

**4IR:** Fourth Industrial Revolution

**ABM:** *Abahlali baseMjondolo*

**AU:** African Union

**BEE:** Black Economic Empowerment

**BLM:** Black Lives Matter

**CDA:** Critical Discourse Analysis

**CODESA:** Convention for a Democratic South Africa

**EE:** Equal Education

**ICASA:** Independent Communications Authority of South Africa

**ICT:** Information and Communication Technology

**LPM:** Landless People's Movement

**NDP:** National Development Plan

**NGO:** Non-Governmental Organisation

**RMF:** Rhodesmustfall

**SABC:** South African Broadcasting Corporation

**SONA:** State of the Nation Address

**UN:** United Nations

**US:** United States

**UPM:** Unemployed People's Movement



## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION

### 1.1 Introduction

The advent of social media, which has coincided with the beginning of the millennium, has augmented human communications to unprecedented levels. The emergence of social media in the early 2000s has reinvigorated debates about the potential of these new media in enabling more dialogue. To date, these platforms have grown exponentially and captured the minds of many people around the globe. According to Statista (2021), 30 million South Africans are using social media; thus, social media are an important medium with a social, political and economic impact that cannot be ignored. Social media connect their users with their families and friends, disseminate news, enable users to share breaking news and satisfy their gratification for various media needs. Social media are amongst the best sources of news because of their ability to provide breaking news. Kwak, Lee, Park, and Moon (2010) succinctly indicate that *Twitter* plays a supplementary role in providing and disseminating news. There is no deficit of literature regarding the role of social media in all spheres of life (Smith 2011; Castells 2012; Shirky 2008; Kamp 2016). This illustrates the extent to which the ubiquitous nature of social media has attracted the interest of scholars from all domains of life, including the social, political, and economic spheres.

Whilst social media have been heralded as an alternative space where various individuals can communicate their concerns, the power of social media in representing the subaltern voices has not been thoroughly researched. The research investigates the extent to which social media has become the alternative media for social movements representing the subalterns, such as the unemployed, the landless, shack dwellers and poor students who are the victims of financial exclusions. This subset of the population has been under-researched by mainstream scholarship. Various studies seem to focus on a popular social movement that captured the narrative across the continent (Aouragh 2012; Bosch 2016; Daniels 2016; Gerbaudo 2012). The gap this study seeks to fill is that less popular social movements have not been covered extensively by academic inquiry. This study also looks beyond the popular social movements in order to present a glaring picture of alternative media in the digital age. The other gap that has been identified is the lack of an account from the perspectives

of social activists and their members. Relying primarily on social media analysis proves not to give a complete depiction of reality. Therefore, this study, which subscribes to the decolonial tradition, is centred on the voices of the subaltern whose views and opinions have been marginalised. It demonstrates how various social movements use social media to communicate subaltern politics.

It is essential to acknowledge that traditional mainstream media have failed to prioritise the discursive practices of progressive social movements. The mainstream media have been focusing on dominant topics that are underpinned by neoliberal ideologies (Couldry 2010). Kupe (2021) indicated that the big corporate media has pushed non-conforming and alternative ideas to the margin. The arrival of new media promises a revolutionary shift as it enables more interactions. The new media has been heralded as transformatory by writers such as Castells (2004), as it promises to revolutionise every aspect of communication. Whilst social media bears a lot of potential, there is a gap in evidence relating to how the new media allows alternative ideas to challenge the dominant narratives. Social media remains an intricate medium that requires more scholarly exploration and engagement to understand how it functions in the real world.

This exploratory study is inspired by the critical and decolonial or post-colonial paradigms that ought to be a defining feature of studies conducted in Africa or the global south in particular. The decolonial paradigm places more emphasis on the oppressed and the extent to which they are placed on the margin of society. As such, the study was conducted within the realm of critical, social, and decolonial or post-colonial theories such as the Network Society Theory, the Critical Political Economy Theory, the Post-colonial Theory of subaltern, and the Public Sphere Theory. The research also draws on a variety of literature from critical, social, and decolonial or post-colonial scholars who have analysed social media in relation to how it can provide an alternative space to the voiceless (Bosch 2016; Castells 2012; Daniels 2016; Fuchs 2014a; Kupe 2021; Moyo 2018; Moyo and Mutsvairo 2018; Mutsvairo 2016).

According to Kupe (2021), critical media research critiques the role of the media because it is responsible for producing images and representations that shape people's realities. In this study, the critical and decolonial paradigms also played an integral role in selecting the philosophical underpinnings of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. In this case, the qualitative research design is considered



befitting to the exploration of the phenomenon under investigation. The key qualitative methods that were used are in-depth interviews and social media analysis or personal observation of social media. The interviews were conducted with five members of the following social movements: *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, *#feesmustfall*, *Equal Education*, *Landless People's Movement* and the *Unemployed People's Movement*. The study also went on to dissect social media data (*Facebook* and *Twitter*<sup>1</sup>) from the five selected social movements in order to analyse the trends and discourses emanating from social movements. Social media analysis was conducted from 2015 to 2020. The researcher's positionality as a user of social media was also an integral element in the analysis of the emerging trends.

## **1.2 Background to and rationale for the study**

This study is located within the discipline of Media and Cultural Studies, a discipline which is going through a rapid transition driven by new technologies. According to Kupe (2021), the media is a contested terrain encapsulating the battle of ideas relating to the direction society should take in various economic, political, and social spheres. As a carrier of culture and ideologies, the media is a salient institution in the socialisation process. Therefore, it is crucial to use critical research to analyse the media, which is considered the fourth estate. Moyo and Mutsvairo (2018) contend that good media research should be borne out of critical thinking that can challenge systems of domination such as the capitalist ideology. This study is significant in that it investigates how social media can play an alternative media role that challenges the dominant narrative.

The media sector, which is currently going through a transition powered by the ICT sector, is receiving serious attention from government and regulators alike. Chapter 4 of the NDP (2010) recognises ICT as one of the economic infrastructures capable of enabling economic growth and development. The NDP also recognises the need to develop more ICT infrastructure in order to build a more inclusive society and thus reduce poverty and inequality. The plan also indicated that ICT can enhance a better life for all citizens and unlock the potential of citizens irrespective of their backgrounds. Because research on ICT is relatively new, there is still a gap in knowledge regarding

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<sup>1</sup>The platform's name has been changed from *Twitter* to X. Throughout this dissertation the name *Twitter* is used because the research was conducted when the platform was called *Twitter*.

the extent to which social media can act as an alternative media in a world where social movements are polarised.

Since the onset of the new millennium, the arrival of social media has augmented human communication to an unprecedented level. These ubiquitous platforms that have transformed human communication have presented many opportunities for social movements. Various studies have demonstrated the extent to which social media causes revolutions that bring about economic and social changes (Castells 2012; Smith 2011; Kamp 2016; Shirky 2008). However, some of these studies have been criticised for being reductionist in their approach.

Therefore, it remains questionable whether social movements that mainly represent the subalterns are using social media to challenge the hegemony. The social movements represent the struggles of the subalterns who strive to be heard by the authorities. As a developing nation, South Africa is plagued by economic and social challenges that have led to the formation of most of these social movements. South Africa is also confronted by the highest cost of communication. Thus, it is imperative that the research investigates the extent to which social media serves as an alternative media space that disseminates alternative discourses. This research is bent on addressing the information vacuum that exists in the area of new media.

This research has been motivated by events such as Arab Springs, Occupy Wall Street, and the Fallist movements, in which social movements have taken to social media spaces to communicate their concerns. Social media are often perceived as an alternative space that is not censored by the traditional media gatekeepers such as editors, regulators, and politicians. The lack of traditional gatekeepers means that anyone can become a writer, a blogger, or a social media influencer. In the past, social movements had to rely on traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television which mostly overlooked their concerns. Recently, several studies have focused on how social movements use social media to enhance activism (Bosch 2016; Daniels 2016; Fuchs 2014a; Gerbaudo 2012; Mutsvairo 2016).

This study initiates a radical departure from the previous studies that focused mainly on mainstream or popular social movements such as the Fallist movement, the Arab Springs, and the Occupy Wall Street protest. This study goes into the base of the

matter and investigates social movements that represent the subalterns; such groups struggle to receive the media spotlight. Rather than focusing on social media observation, which can inadvertently reveal an incomplete reality of social media activism, this study seeks to conduct various interviews with social media activists in order to capture the lived reality of activists leading these movements. This, in turn, addresses the knowledge gap that relates to how social movements can use social media to challenge the dominant narratives. This study, which advances the need for alternative media in the digital age, is motivated by the researcher's interest in social justice, thus representing the subaltern beings and the need to accelerate social change.

### **1.3 Research problem**

The history of alternative media is deep-rooted and has its origin in the apartheid era where access to publishing and radio frequency was reserved for the State and its allies. Moyo (2014) indicated that the need for alternative media rises during the crisis moment. During the apartheid era, the mainstream media was designed to promote apartheid nationalism; hence, alternative media was seen as a necessity. However, non-governmental media were often impeded by the apartheid government's draconian laws (Kupe 2007). The post-apartheid South Africa embraced and democratised alternative media. The end of apartheid witnessed a decline in the alternative press because it could no longer serve the purpose of fighting apartheid. Various studies have also cited lack of funding as one of the issues that led to the disappearance of alternative media (Berger 1998; Lloyd, Duncan, Minnie and Busiek 2010; Mpofu 1996). Most of the alternative media stopped functioning partly due to the disappearance of support from foreign donors who were supporting anti-apartheid struggles. Berger (1998) argues that there is a space for alternative media because the mainstream media has limited reach and lacks credibility. The alternative media also struggles to survive in an environment dominated by the mainstream media that is highly commercialised.

Even though apartheid ended in 1994, representation has not significantly shifted in some mainstream newspapers. Various South African scholars have demonstrated the lack of transformation within the media (Finlay 2018; Govenden 2019; Kupe 2021; Mpofu-Walsh 2021; Wasserman 2015). According to Mpofu-Walsh (2021), the past

three decades have seen the South African media failing to overcome the momentum of apartheid patterns of power. This inescapable reality is also demonstrated in the State of Newsroom Publication report which has revealed that the South African media is over-represented by White and male figures (Finlay 2018). Therefore, it is not peculiar that the representation continues to over-represent issues of the few elite audiences that are attractive to advertisers. In addition, because of the lack of transformation in the mainstream media, the alternative media has the potential to represent subaltern politics. In this case, alternative media is necessary in the digital age as it continues to challenge the dominant narratives.

In the digital age, the way in which the media operates seems to be changing due to the increased penetration of social media. The arrival of social media with various platforms for individuals to communicate their truth to power calls for the rethink of alternative media. Unlike traditional media, which is highly regulated and is often used to protect politicians or their economic allies (Curran 2000), social media has the potential to provide an alternative space for social activists. However, the extent to which social media acts as an alternative media is still subject to academic and scientific inquiry. Social media remains a complicated medium in which scientific and scholarly communities are still trying to fathom how it works.

In an attempt to understand social media, the following definition suffices. According to Van Dijk (2012: 180), social media refers to the “internet applications that enable the sharing of things.” Social media has also transformed the role of audiences from that of consumers to that of producers. Unlike traditional media, which is often underpinned by certain political and economic ideologies, social media has the potential to provide an alternative voice to the voiceless. Chiumbu (2012) indicated that social movements are also increasingly using mobile phones to mobilise and share information. This entails the understanding that disenfranchised audiences who feel that the mainstream media is side-lining their views can now use mobile phones, including various social media platforms, to challenge the status quo. However, various constraints may hinder social media's ability to become a viable alternative media. The challenges that manifest themselves through the digital divide, regulatory threats, rapid commercialisation, and moral and ethical issues of social media were examined to determine their implications in this complex phenomenon.

Whilst the extent to which social media can be regarded as an alternative media has been met with various challenges, this study aims to propose a viable model for digital alternative media in the age of a networked society. In order to achieve the objective stated above, this study conducted interviews with various leaders of social movements and carried out social media analysis.

#### **1.4 Research questions**

1. What opportunities do social movements derive from using social media as their alternative media?
2. What are the threats of social media in becoming a viable alternative media?
3. To what extent does the ownership and control of social media inhibit and accelerate alternative voices?
4. What is the viable model to sustain alternative media in the era of digitisation and commercialisation?

#### **1.5 Research aim and objectives**

Representation in most of the commercially driven mainstream media seems to target society's affluent audience (Herman and Chomsky 2008). As a result, the less affluent audience, such as the unemployed, the rural dwellers, and the previously disadvantaged groups, find themselves without any form of media to represent their viewpoints. Therefore, there is a constant need for alternative media in South Africa to represent diverse voices currently under-represented by the mainstream media. The arrival of social media has the potential to act as a panacea to lack of representation. As such, the study aims to investigate the extent to which social media has become an alternative media to the social movements operating in the digital era.

Based on the aims presented above, the objectives of this research are exploratory and descriptive. Babbie (2016: 90) states that exploratory research is designed "to satisfy the researcher's curiosity and desire for better understanding." An exploratory study is mostly applicable to new areas of study such as the new media, which is still a subject of academic and scientific inquiry. Therefore, an exploratory study is not mostly concerned with finding answers to complex phenomena such as the extent to which social media can be considered alternative media but to provide a better understanding of specific phenomena. To satisfy his curiosity and better understand

the topic at hand, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the leaders of the social movements to explore how they use social media to communicate their alternative discourses. The exploratory objectives are applicable in a situation where the researcher conducts extensive literature studies, exploring the works of other scholars in the field to have existing foundational and current knowledge on the phenomenon being studied.

On the other hand, the objective of this research is also descriptive. Descriptive research aims to describe situations in their natural settings (Babbie 2016). Descriptive research answers the 'what', 'where', 'when', and 'how' questions. The research observes the social media pages of selected social movements in order to describe the extent to which they use social media to communicate their alternative discourses. For instance, the social media analysis will reveal how often the social movements update their statuses on their social media pages, the number of followers they have, the number of people that are engaging with them on social media, the kind of message being communicated to the followers, and how it is being communicated.

The exploratory and descriptive objectives were used to unpack the four objectives of the study. The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To redefine alternative media within the contemporary context of social media.
2. To determine the opportunities and challenges that are presented by social media in the digital age.
3. To establish the role that social media owners can play in accelerating alternative voices.
4. To identify the sustainable model for social media as alternative media in the digital age.

The first key objective of this study seeks to redefine alternative media within the contemporary context of social media. The arrival of social media, which offers unprecedented platforms that embrace a variety of viewpoints, calls for the redefining of alternative media. In an attempt to redefine alternative media, the study also delves into the practices of social movements that have emerged in the digital age to determine the extent to which social media promotes subaltern politics. Using social media analysis and various theories, this study analysed the potential of social media

to give voice to the voiceless in a neoliberal environment. According to Couldry (2010: 2), “the voice enables us to build an alternative view of politics that is at least partly oriented to valuing process of voice.” The Network Society Theory was instrumental in informing the potential of social media as alternative media. This contestation culminated in redefining alternative media in the digital age.

The second key objective of this study seeks to determine the opportunities and challenges that are presented by social media in the digital age. Just like any other media, social media has its opportunities and challenges. The advantages of social media are encapsulated in its flexibility, interactivity, convergence, and disappearance of space and time. This contrasts sharply with the traditional media patterns of distributing news linearly (that is, sender-to-receiver). This study also notes that various concerns may hinder social media’s ability to become a viable alternative platform. Such concerns include the digital divide, regulatory threats, rapid commercialisation, and moral and ethical challenges relating to new media. Therefore, it is necessary to have a study of this nature that contests the opportunities and challenges of social media as an alternative media that challenges the dominant narratives. This objective seeks to bridge the gap of information in this field using South African case studies and contexts.

The third key objective locates social media in relation to its ownership and control. Much of the discourse around social media as an alternative media often tries to ignore the most pertinent issue of ownership and control of social media. According to Kupe (2021), media ownership and control play a key role in deciding the position and the direction of the media. The media is often owned by huge conglomerates that have the potential to support the dominant narrative that sustains their existence. Therefore, the study discusses the extent to which social media ownership and control enable or inhibit alternative and critical discourses that have the potential to change the status quo of the oppressed. The Critical Political Economy Theory has played a key role in providing a foundational and theoretical background to this phenomenon.

The fourth objective seeks to identify a sustainable model for social media in the digital age. The traditional form of alternative media became unsustainable because it could not withstand commercialisation. Social media is also not immune to

commercialisation since most of its platforms are owned by dominant groups. Therefore, this study was bent on identifying the model to sustain alternative media in the digital age by interviewing various stakeholders and consulting a wide array of literature.

In a nutshell, the study conducted a textual analysis of social media pages (*Twitter* and *Facebook*) of social movements and conducted interviews with the activists of various social movements to explore and describe the phenomenon under study. It is also imperative for this study to look at the sustainability of social media in the age of accelerated information sharing. As such, this study proposed a sustainable model for digital alternative media in the context of a networked society. The next section presents the research outline, which provides a brief synopsis of various chapters constituting this dissertation.

## **1.6 Research outline**

Chapter One is the introductory chapter that provides the background to the study, the research problem, the aim and objectives, the key questions, and the rationale for conducting this study. This chapter has introduced various chapters that follow in this study, such as the literature review, the theoretical framework, the methodology, the findings, and the discussion.

Chapter Two presents the literature review, which is the backbone of this study because it shows similar works that have been carried out on this topic, as well as its importance and relevance to the current topic. The literature review provides comprehensive debates that are crucial in contextualising the current study, which deals with social media as alternative media. Although the exact study has not been conducted within South Africa or elsewhere, there is a wide array of related literature that gives this study an academic grounding. The first section provides a historical overview of South African media and its regulatory environment. This overview located the alternative media within its historical, social, political and economic background. The second section covers some of the contemporary definitions of alternative media, the genesis of alternative media, and how it is transcending to the digital age. The third section unpacks social media and various debates on how social media can be an alternative media for social movements. The literature related to the success of contemporary social movements, which is often correlated to social media, was also



reviewed. Not much has been written about this topic which deals with social media as an alternative media in South Africa; therefore, the chapter included internationally acclaimed scholarly work and juxtaposed them with the local context.

Chapter Three presents the theoretical approach framing this study. The theories are very crucial as they locate the current research problem within the realm of an extant theory or proposition. Although the field of social media encompasses a new area of study, the environment in which social media exists has been largely theorised by traditional theories. This study is located within the critical, social, decolonial, or postcolonial theories. Such theories include the Network Society Theory, the Critical Political Economy Theory, the Public Sphere Theory, and the Post-Colonial Theory of Subaltern. These theories are considered helpful in contextualising the debates about social media as alternative media.

Chapter Four details the research methods, particularly the various methods and strategies that were used to collect and analyse data in order to fulfil the objectives of this study. The chapter discusses the philosophical assumptions underpinning the study. It outlined the critical research and decolonial of research paradigms, the qualitative research design, and data collection methods which include in-depth interviews and social media analysis. The relevance, applicability, and limitations of the above-mentioned data collection methods were also covered. The data analysis method, the critical discourse analysis (CDA), was also discussed. Issues relating to ethical awareness in research were also outlined.

Chapter Five, Chapter Six, Chapter Seven, Chapter Eight, and Chapter Nine present the findings as well as the analysis and discussion of the findings. Owing to the broad nature of the study, the findings were presented in five interlinked chapters. The five chapters present the summary of findings derived from in-depth interviews and social media analysis. In these chapters, CDA was used to analyse and interpret the findings. Each chapter concluded with a discussion of the findings. The discussion involved relating the findings to the research problem, extant literature, and theoretical underpinnings. The discussion also demonstrated how the study has addressed the gap in the literature that existed prior to the current study.

Chapter Ten is the last chapter of the study and presents the conclusion and

recommendations arising from the findings. This chapter provides a summative overview of the research. This concluding chapter also recommends ways of strengthening social media so that it responds to the subaltern politics embodied in social movements. It also proffers various recommendations to policymakers, activists, and the scholarly community. The chapter also advances the academic sphere by critically recommending future studies that seek to close the various gaps that exist in the literature. It also discusses whether the findings address the main research questions or research problem and whether the findings support or reject the literature or existing theory.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the entire study. The introduction consisted of the background to the research, the research problem, the research questions, research aims and objectives; it also gave an outline of the dissertation. In recapitulating the research problem being examined in this study, the research revolved around social media as an alternative media that is still subject to intensive research. Social media is a versatile medium that allows everyone to access, impart and receive information. In this sense, the main thesis advanced by this study is that although social media has been embraced by a variety of stakeholders, it is a complicated medium that requires more prudent research to be undertaken to understand how it works in the real world. Within an African context where the question of the digital divide, marginalisation of African languages, neo-colonialism, and African dependency syndrome still lingers, calls for an in-depth understanding of social media are necessary. Decolonial or postcolonial, social, and critical approaches were applied to this study to understand the extent to which social media can act as alternative media for social movements. A case involving social movements was selected because these movements represent the marginalised members of society. Such movements require good media coverage to hold those in power accountable. However, the traditional mainstream media is seen to be representing the views of the dominant group. Therefore, social media is positioned as a place where alternative discourses can circulate without frontiers, but this is still a subject of ongoing research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REIMAGING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN THE DIGITAL AGE: A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which social media has become an alternative media in the age of digitisation within the South African context. The age of new, ubiquitous media provides a variety of platforms that have the potential to challenge the existing status quo that is characterised by social and economic exclusion. This section reviews the existing literature related to this topic, showing its lineage from the background to existing knowledge and contemporary practice. The literature review is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the historical background of the media within South Africa and how it has laid the foundation for new media. The second part conceptualises the genesis of alternative media and how it has transcended to the new media through the digital age. The third part deals with the pertinent issue of social media-driven movements and the impact they have on all spheres of human life.

### **2.2 Background of South African media**

This section contextualises the historical background of South African media during the colonial-cum-apartheid era, the transition to democracy and the post-apartheid era. These are significant epochs in the history of South Africa as they demonstrate a paradigm shift in societal organisation. Such a historical shift had a bearing on the regulatory environment and the nature of the media that existed. The discussion also demonstrates that the regulatory environment affecting the media during the colonial-cum-apartheid era was characterised by State control (Lloyd et al. 2010; Tomaselli 1997). The media has been an instrument of power used by the government to control the flow of information and disseminate ideologies. The need for alternative media gained momentum due to tighter State control and regulations. On the other side, the transition to democracy and post-apartheid eras coincided with the end of the Cold War which opened the liberalisation of markets and globalisation. This period witnessed the global conglomerates usurping media power from the State. The regulatory environment protected the interest of the government of the time and its economic allies. It is at this juncture that powerful social media emerged. Digital media

presents a challenge for communication regulators due to its complexities. Thus, this study looks into the co-existence of alternative voices within social media that are part of the global behemoth.

### **2.2.1 The nature of the media during the colonial and apartheid era**

In an attempt to holistically understand alternative media, it is very crucial to review the historical context of the phenomenon within South Africa. Curran and Seaton (2009) indicate that history is important because without an understanding of the past, it will be difficult to be sensible about the present. There is extensive literature covering the history and the background of the Black press during the colonial and apartheid era. Nyamora (2007) in Mano and Mukhongo (2016: 28) indicate that “it is necessary for the history of alternative media to be understood in relation to suppressive behaviour of colonial regimes, the dual legacy of European missionaries, discriminatory politics, economic inequalities in post-independent nations and a lack of freedom in conditions of capitalist exploitation.” In Africa, colonialism has continued replicating itself through the capitalist structures that see Africans as subordinates. These capitalist structures also have power and control over mainstream media to augment their suppressive behaviour. Therefore, it is fundamental to look at alternative media within the history of colonialism that is foundational to the idea of capital accumulation.

This section outlines the history of the alternative media thus contextualising the phenomenon in its contemporary form. However, there is a dearth of literature relating to the oral and traditional methods of communication that were used in the pre-colonial and colonial eras because colonial history was characterised by a tremendous subversion of African indigenous systems. The indigenous communication methods such as drums, storytelling, dance, graffiti and music are unaccounted for in the literature. Various researchers have focused on the Black press whose inception coincided with the arrival of the missionaries during the earlier part of the 1800s (Switzer and Switzer 1979; Couzens 1972; Johnson 1991). The independence of the Black press, which has its roots in missionaries, remained dubious because of the ideological conventions in which they were conceptualised. In a nutshell, the missionary-controlled press could be characterised as a hegemonic press because it was advancing another sphere of colonialism. The missionaries who were bent on

converting African societies to Christianity could be seen as one of many facets of colonialism. Consequently, it is dubious to conceptualise the missionary-controlled press as an alternative press because it hardly served any alternative role.

In South Africa, the period between 1884 and 1932 saw the arrival of an independent Black press that was more radical than the missionary-controlled one (Switzer and Switzer; 1979; Couzens 1982; Johnson 1991). Such publications included *Imvo Zabatsundu* in 1884, *Izwi la Bantu* in 1897, *Ilanga lase Natal* in 1903 and many others. Most of the independent Black press struggled to sustain themselves and in 1932 most of them were taken over by the consortium known as *Bantu Press* (Couzens 1982). Other publications such as *Imvo*, *Ilanga*, *Ikwezile Africa*, and *Mochonono* were all sold. Nevertheless, publications such as *Umteteli*, *Umsebenzi*, and *Unkululeko* remained independent. However, it remains unclear how these newspapers managed to survive in an environment that was hostile to the independent Black press.

On the broadcasting front, the introduction of radio in 1924 presented another opportunity for the South African government to advance and intensify its ideologies through the nationalisation of airwaves (Lloyd et al. 2010). The regulatory framework allowed the government to be the sole custodian of airwaves and to issue broadcasting licences.

The emergence of apartheid in 1948 witnessed an ideological shift in terms of mediascape. According to Tomaselli (1997), the National Party introduced the Afrikaans Language Press to oppose the English Press which was dominant at that time. Tomaselli (1997) further illustrates that the wrangling between the interests of the English and Afrikaans in the media inevitably led to the suppression of Black interest which was always marginalised. Consequently, the need for alternative media was accelerated by this crisis. However, the hostility toward alternative media gained momentum during the apartheid era.

The literature related to alternative media during the apartheid era is covered extensively by Switzer (2000). During the apartheid era, the alternative press suffered for their left-wing policies. The apartheid system incarcerated, deported, raided, beat, shot, and harassed anyone working for the alternative media, tapping their telephones and intercepting their mail (Switzer, 2000). Even though the South African

Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) launched Radio Bantu in 1959 to broadcast in African languages, the radio station did not serve any alternative role. According to Lloyd et al. (2010) Radio Bantu advanced the apartheid concept of separate development. The radio station was the apartheid government's propaganda machinery masquerading as an African language broadcaster. The programmes were supervised by apartheid commanders to ensure that the programming was in line with the mandates of the apartheid government.

The suppression of opposition voices led to the creation of what was commonly known as the guerrilla or underground media. Various scholars have demonstrated that when ordinary members of society are not given the platform to voice their discontent, they always devise ways of challenging the hegemony (Matsilele and Ruhanya 2021; Moyo 2014; Mpofu 2014). *Radio Freedom*, an underground radio station created by the ANC, represented a creative way of countering the apartheid media hegemony. At its inception in 1963, *Radio Freedom* used to broadcast from a secret location in Johannesburg (Lloyd et al. 2010; Mosia et al. 1994). Nevertheless, the apartheid police raided their hideout and confiscated their transformers. Determined to fight the injustices perpetrated by apartheid, *Radio Freedom* was granted a slot to broadcast on various stations around Africa, such as Zambia, Angola, Madagascar, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe (Masia et al. 1994). This signifies the creativity and resilience of alternative media in South Africa during the apartheid era. Quintessentially, Haron and Buccus (2009) indicate that the scholarly research ignored the crucial role played by the religious press in the struggle against apartheid. It is also clearly indicated that the religious press reported on items that were ignored by the mainstream press. For instance, they reported on the heart of what was happening within the communities, particularly economic hardships and social issues that plagued the communities (ibid). This further demonstrates the role of multifaceted institutions that contributed to the history of alternative media during the repressive apartheid era.

The apartheid government's effort to silence the dissent was reinvigorated during the arrival of television. Television, which was the new media of that time, was delayed by the apartheid government owing to the debates around the negative impact of this medium (Lloyd et al. 2010). The apartheid govt viewed television as a threat to its ideologies because it spread images and artefacts from Westernised perspectives

(Steenveld and Strelitz 1994; Lloyd et al. 2010). The apartheid government's posture was linked to an argument advanced by Beaumont Schoeman (cited in Dawson: 2001: 119), who argued that television "doesn't respect differences, it breaks and loosens up cultures, it sweeps aside borders and eats away the values of communities." Such debates led to the creation of the Meyer Commission of Enquiry in December 1969 to investigate the perceived impact of television in South Africa. In 1979, the Commission recommended that "South Africa must have its own television service in order to nurture and strengthen its own spiritual roots, to foster respect and love for its spiritual heritage and to respect and protect the South African way of life, as it has developed in its historical context" (Steenveld and Strelitz 1994: 39). Although television was introduced in 1976 in South Africa, the apartheid government assumed a greater control and was used to spread its propaganda. In this case, the Afrikaans Press, along with the SABC, helped the apartheid government to maintain its influence over White South Africans from 1948 to 1990 (Tomaselli 1997). Although private broadcasters like MNET were awarded a licence to broadcast in 1986, the licence conditions prevented them from broadcasting news and current affairs (Lloyd et al. 2010). The usurping of television power by the apartheid government is reminiscent of the era of press, telegram and radio. This portrays the attitude that governments have toward the new technologies of the time. The current study, which investigates the extent to which social media can be regarded as an alternative media, contextualises social media within its historical, political and economic contexts.

### **2.2.2 Unpacking the nature of the media during the transition to democracy**

In outlining the background of alternative media, the study discusses alternative media during the transition from apartheid to democracy. This assisted in deciphering the contemporary status of alternative media. The 1990s signalled the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the liberalisation of markets, which eventually opened up space for ownership of media by private players. The commercially-driven media ushered in a new era that was characterised by a boom in new technology. In South Africa, the new policies relating to the transition from apartheid to democracy were negotiated under the auspices of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) between 1990 and 1993. Sewchurran (2016: 10) indicated that "the transition from South Africa's apartheid past saw the hegemonic ideoscape laid down

by the State through the Bill of Rights and the constitution.” Therefore, the Bill of Rights was introduced to address the historical injustices of racial oppression and to usher in a new State premised on human rights and redress.

Within the broadcasting fraternity, the South African parliament established the *Independent Broadcasting Authority* (IBA), currently known as ICASA, to regulate broadcasting in the public interest (Lloyd et al. 2010). This meant that policies were regulated by an independent body rather than the State machinery. The IBA introduced the triple inquiry to investigate broadcasting in the public interest. The triple inquiry, which culminated in the three-tier system of broadcasting was adopted in 1996 (ibid), and included public, commercial and community broadcasting. Community broadcasting, which was seen as an alternative to public and private broadcasting, has been one of the positive developments in the area of alternative media. However, there are some disagreements arising from the actual reach of these policies in terms of transforming the mediascape (Sewchurran 2016). This entails that these regulatory frameworks are only good on paper and not in practice. For instance, Mpofu (1996) indicated that community broadcasting is usurped by private and State interests that see its potential. In whichever era, the media continues to be a contested terrain (Kupe 2021) because it is responsible for producing ideas that inform cultures, ideologies and politics. It is through the media that voters are made aware of the progress and failures of their elected officials.

Whilst the broadcasting sector had been regulated in the public interest, the post-apartheid era witnessed a decline in the radical press. Evidence attests to the existence of a large body of literature relating to alternative media during the post-apartheid era (Berger 1998; Kupe 2007; Mpofu 1996; and Switzer 2000). In essence, these scholars discussed the challenges that many alternative media titles encountered during the transition from apartheid to democracy. As the apartheid regime came to an end, most of the alternative presses were rendered unsustainable. The other reason for the decline in the alternative press was the withdrawal of foreign donors (Berger 1998:120; Lloyd et al. 2010; Mpofu 1996). This represents some of the struggles that affected the alternative media during the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa.

On the other hand, some alternative titles succumbed to commercial pressures. Mpofu



(1996) expressed concern about the decline of alternative press and the rise of corporate monopoly press in post-apartheid South Africa. The plight of the alternative press to survive during the era characterised by a lack of donor funding contributed to their vulnerability. Mpofu (1996) conducted interviews with various stakeholders who were in control of the media. The study discovered that the rise of the corporate press had a negative impact on the alternative press. This view is also shared by Switzer (2000) who indicated that after apartheid, *The Guardian* newspaper, which was the voice of the South African struggle during apartheid, was privatised into what is currently called the *Mail and Guardian*. These studies were instrumental in elucidating the waning of alternative media since the dawn of independence. The gap in knowledge manifesting in all the studies presented above includes the lack of discussion on alternative media and the new digital media. Most of these studies (Switzer 2000; Berger 1998; Mpofu 1996; Kupe 2007) were carried out during the 1990s and early 2000s and it is anticipated to have a lack of account of alternative media during the social media era. This demonstrates the extent of the gap in literature within the South African context.

### **2.2.3 The nature of media during the post-apartheid era**

The post-apartheid era coincided with the era of market liberalisation, deregulation and globalisation. The post-Cold War and post-apartheid eras were characterised by the capitalist ownership of media, which was dominated by global conglomerates. In South Africa, the post-apartheid media was dominated by the *SABC*, *Argus Holdings Ltd*, *Times Media*, *MNET*, *Perskor*, and *Naspers* which were all connected through a wide web of monopoly capital (Tomaselli 1997). This portrays the notion that there is a concentration of ideas in the hands of the few elites and this has an impact on diversity and pluralism, which are the key tenets of democratic media. Therefore, it is unsurprising that many mass media titles are published in English and Afrikaans and mostly distributed within metropolitan areas (Lloyd et al. 2010). Various scholars have warned about monopoly and concentration of media ownership which have a formidable power to lobby the government and propagate the dominant ideas (Bagdikian 2007; Herman and Chomsky 2008; Kupe 2021). This entails that those who control the media have the power to control public opinions and political processes.

The post-apartheid media landscape is one that has been characterised by the lack of transformation (Finlay 2018; Govenden 2019; Kupe 2021; Wasserman 2015). Kupe (2021) has demonstrated that the media in South Africa is intertwined with the history of colonialism and apartheid, which is reflected through languages, representation and sources. It is in this case that Wasserman (2015) has noted that some newspapers written in Afrikaans often carry discourses that seem to deny or reverse racism. In addition, Govenden (2019) also argues that the print media transformation in South Africa reflects what she described as token transformation. Whilst there is a consensus that the South African mediascape is untransformed, the arrival of new media which has the potential to give ordinary people the platform to challenge the dominant systems of power is promising a radical shift.

Within the broadcasting fraternity, the *SABC*, which is the public broadcaster, dominates the airwaves (Lloyd et al. 2010). The *SABC* broadcasts in eleven official languages. The *SABC* Radio has universal access whilst the *SABC* television has near-universal access. This means that the majority of people in South Africa are able to receive *SABC* services despite its questionable independence. Ngwenya (2015) believes that the *SABC* is inextricably linked to the global matrix of power that is characterised by neoliberalism. This translates to the notion that the *SABC* cannot be divorced from the political economy that sees the media as an instrument of capital. Lack of government funding has seen the *SABC* relying heavily on advertising despite its implications. Herman and Chomsky (2008) have warned about the influence of advertisers and funders in promoting elite propaganda. Advertisers expect the broadcasters to broadcast specific content in order to attract more buyers.

The new media promises to revolutionise the mediascape by giving the end users the power to set the agenda. Unlike the previous broadcasting sector (radio and TV), the digital revolution is less regulated. Nkuna (2014) indicated that the digital-migration policies were dominated by the political-cum-economic power relations that are involved in the process. The involvement of economic actors has resulted in policies that respond to their profit motives rather than universal access. Therefore, private capital is seen as maintaining a close relationship with the State in order to influence the direction of policies. The remainder of this chapter locates alternative media within the digital transition. Literature from the South African, African and global contexts has

been reviewed.

### **2.3 Reimagining alternative media in the digital age**

The topics discussed in part two relate to understanding alternative media within the context of historical and contemporary scholarly works. To understand alternative media, the review of literature should also consider that alternative media can be understood against the backdrop of existing definitions. The study extrapolates various definitions in order to redefine alternative media within the contemporary context. The last section of the literature review looks at various studies that speak to the opportunities and challenges of social media in becoming a viable alternative to subaltern beings traditionally disregarded by mainstream mass media that follow advertiser-driven models chasing high LSM groups. Such debates are important in contextualising alternative media in the digital age.

#### **2.3.1 Understanding alternative media**

The meaning of alternative media is discussed in this section to locate alternative media within the context of the current research problem. Downing (2008) and Fuchs (2010) have noted that alternative media is an under-researched topic as it is consistently being neglected by many social science scholars. However, a few scholars have defined alternative media and this section focuses on the work of key scholars on the topic of alternative media, such as Atton (2002a), O'Sullivan (2010), Fuchs (2010), and Sandoval and Fuchs (2010). Quintessentially, it should be reiterated that the term 'alternative media' has broad connotations due to its historical, political and social significance. Some connotations also arise due to various terminologies that are used to describe the phenomenon. Jeppeson (2016) indicated that alternative media encompasses many forms of media that are not specific. Various terminologies that are synonymous with alternative media are used interchangeably by various scholars and these include radical media (Downing 2001), citizens' media (Rodriquez 2011), rhizomatic media (Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier 2008), grassroots media, or participatory media (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010). Jeppesen (2016) further emphasises that alternative media can be understood within its ideological and political foundations. In South Africa, for instance, alternative media was referred to as the Black press (Couzens 1982; Switzer and Switzer 1979; Johnson 1991), guerrilla media, or underground media (Mosia, Riddle and Zaffiro

1994). This illustrates the ideological conceptions in which alternative media played an instrumental role in the fight against the injustices of apartheid and colonialism.

The term 'alternative media' has been used throughout the dissertation despite its intricate applications. The term has been adopted because it encompasses media that are commonly used to counter the hegemony and power of the mainstream media (Fuchs 2010). Such media should also address issues of marginalised groups that are trying to challenge the status quo. This does not necessarily mean that no quagmire is encountered when describing something as a 'mere' alternative. Some scholars have already developed a body of literature that is critical of the term 'alternative media' because of its unintended meaning (Downing 2001; Rodriquez 2011). For example, 'alternative' means something that is opposed to another thing. Downing and Rodriquez have highlighted the problem relating to the terminology of alternative media. Downing (2001) argues that everything is an alternative to another thing at any point in time. This author prefers using the term 'radical media' to 'alternative media' because of the belief that this type of media should effect social change. Radicalism is said to instigate social change since it does not just play the role of being a mere alternative. This type of media is expected to be robust and bold for it to have a meaningful effect on the status quo of the marginalised. This view is also shared by Rodriquez (2011) who believes that the term citizens' media is fit for purpose as it ought to be more effective in serving and responding to the needs of the community. Nevertheless, the term 'alternative media' will be used because it resonates well with the researcher's view regarding the phenomenon being explored and it is used widely within the media and communications fraternity.

Defining alternative media within the context of an intricate medium of social media is not without challenges. In defining alternative media, this dissertation has adopted the simplified definition proffered by Sandoval and Fuchs (2010). In most instances, the term 'alternative media' refers to the media that are considered different from mainstream media in terms of their operation, ownership, and content. Gehl (2015: 2) indicated that alternative media refers to media that are "organised to flatten the producer/consumer hierarchy and thus challenge the media power." This entails the notion that alternative media does not only encompass the content that is 'alternative' but the wholesale ownership of the decentralised forms of media.

In another journal publication, Fuchs (2010) also conceptualised the five characteristics of alternative media in an attempt to provide a broad understanding of alternative media. These characteristics are not the only defining features of alternative media, but its key features. The first characteristic of alternative media, as conceptualised by Fuchs (2010), is *citizen journalism*, which entails that the ordinary members of society become citizen journalists in order to tackle the issues they are facing. Atton (2002a: 4) argues that alternative media “are crucially about offering the means for democratic communication to people who are normally excluded from media production.” This view is supported by Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) who contend that alternative or participatory media should strive to give ordinary members of society a voice and also challenge the status quo within the environment in which it operates. In essence, this tells us that alternative media should be people-centred.

The second characteristic, as identified by Fuchs (2010), entails the *critical form and content*. The content of alternative media provides oppositional standpoints that challenge the dominant forces. Such content should empower the oppressed, the dominated, the enslaved, and the exploited. In other words, the content should give voice to the subalterns. Downing, in Atton (2002a), also theorised alternative media as radical media that can effect social changes. Therefore, the content of alternative media should radically address the intersectional issues of race, gender and class.

The third characteristic is that of *grassroots media organisations* (Fuchs 2010). Alternative media is a type of media that is owned by collective beings without the influence of corporations that are driven by profits. This implies that alternative media should be non-commercial and should be financed through donations, public resources, and people donating their manpower (volunteers). The fourth characteristic of alternative media is the *alternative distribution of content*. This means an alternative method of distribution that makes it easy to copy, share and distribute alternative media content to its intended audiences. The fifth characteristic of alternative media, as conceptualised by Fuchs (2010), is *critical reception*. The recipient of alternative media content must be able to question the injustices perpetrated by the dominance.

Although the above discussion offers the key characteristics of alternative media, the definition of alternative media presented above does not speak directly to the changes

that were brought about by social media, which is a perplexing medium. Apart from a few articles (Gehl 2015, Fenton and Barrassi 2011) that analysed the relationship between social media and alternative media, there is a dearth of literature conceptualising social media as alternative media. Most of these studies were conducted before the dawn of social media and did not deliberate on the question of social media. Even recent studies, such as the one conducted by Jeppesen (2016), have shied away from including social media in their attempt to understand alternative media. This study interrogates some changes social media brought to alternative media. In this case, the reviewed literature defines alternative media within the digital media framework. Since the research is situated within South Africa, it would be an injustice if the research does not take into consideration the issues of the oppressed, colonised, enslaved, and landless. The research should also ponder on defining alternative media within the context of Africa, an aspect which mainstream media scholars have ignored. The next section juxtaposes alternative media with mainstream media.

### **2.3.2 Alternative media versus Mainstream media**

One of the defining features of alternative media is its binary relationship with mainstream media. This entails that one cannot talk about alternative media without juxtaposing it with mainstream media. Bailey et al. (2008) identified the mainstream media as the site of the dominant political and economic actors that are at play. This signifies that the ideological stance of economic and political ownership of the media is over-represented. In this case, the mainstream media always has competing agendas that triumph over issues of social justice (ibid). Couldry (2010) adds that the mainstream media amplifies neoliberal values, whilst Herman and Chomsky (2008) see the mainstream media as institutions that promote elite propaganda. The power to decide on the topics to be covered also lies in the hands of its ownership. Because the mainstream media either misrepresents or under-represents the views of the dominated, Bailey et al. (2008: 16) believe that alternative media can come into play and present the “counter-hegemonic critique of the mainstream media.” Alternative media can be in the form of community radios, local newspapers, newsletters, magazines, and online news sites that are non-mainstream. As conceptualised by Bailey et al. (2008), the following table summarises the main differences between the mainstream and alternative media.

<b>Mainstream media</b>	<b>Alternative media</b>
Large scale and geared toward a homogenous audience	Small scale and geared toward community – a disenfranchised group
State or commercially owned	Independent of the State and the market
Vertically structured with professional staff	Horizontally structured and allowing for individual members to access and participate
Carriers of dominant narratives and representation	Carriers of non-dominant (counter-hegemonic) narratives and representation

Table 1: The difference between alternative media and mainstream media

In the digital age, both alternative and mainstream media are moving to digital spaces to appeal to the contemporary audiences of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The lines between mainstream and alternative media are becoming blurred due to digital convergence. It is this blurring of lines that has stimulated the researcher's interest in this intricate topic. A study conducted by Bailey et al. (2008), which analysed the use of blogs during the Iraqi wars to challenge mainstream reporting, discovered that:

It is difficult to sustain a rigid separation between alternative and mainstream ... They show that whilst some actors use alternative media channels, such as weblogs, they in fact reproduce hegemony. Similarly, some counter-hegemonic voices are given a platform by alternative media in their quest for balance (Bailey et al. 2008: 81).

This reveals the intertwined roles that bloggers can play while reporting various phenomena. However, Bailey et al. (2008) also note that the mainstream media has the power to privilege certain bloggers at the expense of others. This entails that the mainstream media used its hegemonic criteria to select certain voices that could fit their professional agenda. This further illustrates that the dominance of mainstream media within the digital space cannot be ignored.

Also adding to the debate on the dominance of mainstream media in the digital age is Fuchs (2014a), who indicated that the online world tends to privilege the mainstream media with big financial resources. The websites of mainstream media such as the *BBC*, *CNN*, *New York Times*, and *Daily Mail*, are amongst those most visited sites worldwide. In some cases, well-established alternative media sites are often absorbed by big corporations for them to be commodified (ibid). The case in point is the Huffington Post, a blog project that was bought by the global conglomerate - AOL, and became a mainstream media site. This elucidates the extent to which financial resources are the pillar of the mainstream media that continues to dominate the discourses in digital media. This study also looks into the political economy of social media and the extent to which this has any bearing on the alternative role of social media.

### **2.3.3 Agenda setting in the digital age**

The power of mainstream media to set an agenda is now being challenged by the new forms of communication that promise to place human interaction at the centre. Agenda setting encapsulates the power of the media to direct and shape public opinion (De Beer and Botha 2008). The mainstream media, such as newspapers and radio, has been largely used to shape public opinion. In this case, Atton (2002b) argues that the mainstream media is largely monolithic. This means that the mainstream media facilitated a one-way system of communication with little or no input from the public. Resultantly, the mainstream media had the power to influence public dialogue and shape public opinion.

In cases where the ordinary members of society were involved in making stories, there was a practice of gate-keeping. Gate-keeping refers to the extent to which journalists and editors have the power to decide whether to reject, accept or shape a product before publication (De Beer and Botha 2008). As such, the voices of the civil society movement were rarely covered in the mainstream media. In some instances, their voices were covered in specific frames to undermine their causes (Bennet 2003). This entails that the civil society groupings that advocated for various exclusion were mostly covered with a negative tone. Nkuna (2016) found that the media only mediated what constitutes a 'single story' that is characterised by vandalism, violence, and the poverty



of the protesters. Such stories overlook other pertinent dimensions of the protests. Radu, Morwe, and Bird (2012) have found this type of coverage that focuses on the violent nature of the protest to be problematic as it does not tell the audience about the underlying reason behind the protest. Nevertheless, this is not to deny that some social movements often use violence to voice their frustrations. Fanon (1961) has demonstrated that violence is often the only weapon at the disposal of the oppressed. Within South Africa, poor service delivery protests that are violent often receive quick attention from the authorities. Therefore, this gives the impression that perhaps violence is the only language the authority understands the most.

The arrival of new media, with its power of convergence and interactivity, promises to give a voice to ordinary members of society. According to Kamp (2016: 1), “social media now shapes the opinions, perceptions, and actions of the majority whose opinions were previously shaped by information from traditional and mainstream media houses”. A single *Facebook* status or tweet from an ordinary member of society can be shared or re-tweeted by thousands of people all over the world. Within the South African context, various studies have also discovered that social media is now setting the agenda for mainstream media (Bosch 2016; Daniels 2016). In this case, Daniels (2016) believes that the mainstream media and its journalists are ‘hashtag takers’ rather than ‘hashtag setters’. This entails that many of the trending hashtags on *Twitter* originated from activists or ordinary members of society rather than the mainstream media. In this case, Daniels (2016) indicated that the mainstream media became a follower of news during the *#feesmustfall* protest. This is contrary to the documented belief that the elites and the established media players are still exerting a huge influence during the social media era. It is in the interest of this study to look specifically into the power of social media in giving a voice to the disenfranchised social movement.

### **2.3.4 Alternative media going digital**

The following section reviews the literature relating to alternative media in the digital age. Couldry (2010:74) indicated that “alternative media infrastructure emerging online will generate new voices, new conditions for voice”. However, the alternative media that is growing online is not yet consumed by many people or the government on a daily basis. The limited reach makes alternative online spaces wield less power as

compared to the established mainstream media platforms. It is for this reason that the mainstream media continues to wield the power and choose the voices they want to represent.

Within the African context, various scholars, such as Moyo (2007), Moyo (2011), Mpfu (2014), and Matsilele and Ruhanya (2021) have looked into alternative online spaces. Relating to the issue of alternative media going digital, Moyo (2007) analysed the diaspora news website to ascertain the extent of their contribution to the discourse about the Zimbabwean crisis. Moyo (2007) indicated that whilst the websites of newzimbabwe.com and Zimdaily.com represent the alternative media, some challenges still persist. Such challenges include the limited reach of such websites due to the digital divide; the credibility of such websites is also doubted because the writers are using pseudonyms, the lack of editorial lines, the polarisation between news sites and their readers, the extent to which their funding regimes are not clearly transparent and finally the threat of censorship from the State has been lingering. In another study, Moyo (2011) investigated the use of blogs in blogging about the dictatorship in Zimbabwe using a case study of Kubatana bloggers. The point of departure for the study was that “digitisation has occasioned new counter-hegemonic spaces and forms of journalism that are deinstitutionalised and deprofessionalised and whose radicalism is reflected in both form and content” (Moyo 2011: 744). Although the internet is a salient space to impart and disseminate information, Moyo (2011) argues that the accessibility of the internet still embraces elitism, and neoliberal frameworks drive the discourses emanating from such platforms.

Relating to alternative media going digital, Mpfu (2014), has also investigated how Zimbabweans used diasporic online media as alternative public spheres to communicate their discourses relating to the construction of debates on national identity. The study's findings reveal that when ordinary citizens are not given a platform to express their concerns through the mainstream public forum, they are likely to adopt online spaces, which Mpfu (2014) characterised as alternative digital public spheres. This resonates with Moyo's (2014) view that citizens always find creative spaces where they can voice their dissatisfaction with the status quo. The use of creative spaces is not specifically preserved for digital media; for instance, history indicates that the ANC started the underground radio station known as Radio Freedom to

contest the hegemony of the apartheid government. Nevertheless, Matsilele and Ruhanya (2021) caution that while dissidents find creative solutions such as social media to voice their discontent, the authority on the other side is also finding solutions to silence social media dissidence. For instance, the creativity emanating from Radio Freedom during apartheid was met with drastic actions from the apartheid government.

In another related study, Bailey et al. (2008) investigated the use of blogs during the Iraqi wars. The findings indicated that the blogs are challenging the reporting from the mainstream media. Bailey et al. (2008) also added that the internet and blogs offer an alternative way of reporting that has the potential to amplify alternative discourses. In the same vein, the traditional systems of control that were imposed by the State and military were bypassed via the internet. The study concluded that bloggers are entangled in what Bailey et al. (2008) called double hegemony. This also refers to a situation in which bloggers can be absorbed by the mainstream media, which offers both counter-hegemony and hegemonic discourses. The studies reviewed above are crucial in fostering an understanding of how digital spaces, such as blogs, can act as an alternative space.

### **2.3.5 Social media as an alternative media**

Various scholars have dealt with related topics in terms of conflating the terms 'social media' and 'alternative media' (Atton 2002a; Fenton and Barassi 2011; Poell and Borra 2011; Fuchs 2014a; Gehl 2015). There seems to be a dearth of literature that investigates social media as modern alternative media within the South African context. Much of the literature speaks to the history of alternative media in South Africa, which is not the focus of this study. Elsewhere around the globe, Atton (2002a) dwelt on the migration from traditional newsletters to electronic newsletters by various subaltern groups. Some success stories pertaining to the migration from a traditional print newsletter to an electronic newsletter were noted. However, the same cannot be said about social media, which is very perplexing and ubiquitous. A further look at studies with some accounts of social media is outlined below.

Gehl (2015) indicated that the proponents of alternative media have an ambivalent relationship with social media. Whilst social media has the potential to open a variety

of spaces for participation and production of content, the social media owned by global conglomerates are likely to be hostile to alternative ideas. It is important to re-emphasise that social movements are involved in the struggle for better allocation of resources. This entails that social movements are diametrically opposed to the dominant ideas that are perpetuated by global conglomerates. Curran (2012) also adds that the discourses of activist groups are also lost on the internet because their statements tend to get lower search engine listings than corporate sites. This demonstrates that social media, which is an extension of the internet, contributes to the dominant ideology.

A journal article by Fenton and Barassi (2011) also discussed the threats and opportunities of social media in representing alternative political formations. Contrary to the widely held assumption that social media is an alternative media for social groupings, the authors concluded that social media represents a threat to alternative political groups since individuals are becoming more self-centred than acting as a collective (Fenton and Barrassi 2011). This accelerates what Fenton and Barrassi (2011) call the politics of individuation. Curran (2012) has also warned against the phenomenon where the internet becomes a space of individualism.

A study conducted by Poell and Borra (2011) also arrived at related conclusions. The authors analysed the use of *Twitter*, *YouTube*, and *Flickr* during the 2010 Toronto G20 protest. They found that social media was not a viable platform for alternative journalism because few people participated in crowd-sourcing (Poell and Borra 2011). Fuchs (2014) also investigated social media within the context of social movement and concluded that social media was somewhat helpful in social activism. Once again, many of these studies were conducted in other countries where they have different experiences of protest and social movement as compared to South Africa. Therefore, the findings of these studies cannot be generalised to the South African experience because it has its unique history, culture, politics and economy. However, some lessons can be drawn from such studies. For instance, this research borrowed some of the social media analysis techniques used by Poell and Borra (2011) in order to analyse social media texts (see social media analysis in Chapter 6).

### **2.3.6 Alternative media as community media**

One of the emerging views expressed by many alternative media scholars is that the media should serve the interest of the community. O'Sullivan, Duton, and Reiner (1998:213) indicate that "the vital role of alternative media was to offer the communities or groups the opportunities to become involved in the making of programs and to present the local focuses." This view is also echoed by Bailey et al. (2008) who theorised that serving a community was one of the crucial undertakings of alternative media. The authors also provided the contemporary definition of the concept of community that entails geographical and non-geographical community.

As conceptualised by Bailey et al (2008) the concept of community does not relate to a specific geographical location but encompasses a collective identity. Bailey et al. (2008) add that the non-geographical community is called the 'community of interest' or the 'community of practice'. The community of interest entails a "group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about the topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing case" (ibid: 23). Digitisation has led to the creation of a community of interest within cyberspace or virtual community. As a result, the concept of community is not just fixed to a specific geographical location. The advent of online communication platforms necessitates the need to re-imagine the importance of the concept of community in the community media. It is therefore vital for alternative media to serve the interest of the community in whatever format this community prevails.

The importance of community media in South Africa is also protected by the regulatory frameworks that introduced the three-tier broadcasting system, which includes public, private and community broadcasting. Tyali (2017) believes that community media provides an important platform for the Africanisation of the airwaves. This demonstrates that African community media platforms have an important role to play in challenging the dominant narratives. However, it remains unclear whether social media can play a role in the decolonisation process within those spaces that are inherently dominated by Western ideologies.

### **2.3.7 The role of alternative media in development**

South Africa's young democracy is still grappling with triple challenges of inequality,

unemployment, and poverty. Therefore, there is a need to adopt a multipronged approach to resolve some of the challenges that continue to bedevil the country. Research is one of the approaches that can be used to dissipate the impact of the triple challenge. The role of media in development processes has been emphasised by scholars such as Kupe (2007). This emphasis also cascades down to the development of alternative approaches (Curran 2000). Due to the slow transformation of mainstream media in South Africa, Govenden (2019) advocates the return of alternative media to play this developmental role. Therefore, alternative media is seen as one of the interventions that foster transformation in both ownership and content.

### **2.3.8 Critics of alternative media**

Just like any other form of media, alternative media has its antagonists and one of them is Fedler (1978) who argued that alternative media stories are poorly researched, badly written, superficially biased, and repetitious. Another critic of alternative media is O'Sullivan et al. (1998) who argued that alternative media relies on volunteers who are too inexperienced to handle various political, ideological, and cultural issues. The alternative to not using the volunteers would be the use of a dedicated journalist, which may prove to be costly. O'Sullivan et al. (1998) argued that a dedicated workforce would probably need wages and therefore the press would have to meet additional financial commitments. The two authors cited above were not able to offer their critique of alternative media in the digital era as their papers were published before the dawn of new digital media. However, there is no doubt that some of the weaknesses of alternative media continue to manifest in the digital age.

During the digital age, alternative media is being confronted by a myriad of challenges. Since the lines between producers and consumers are difficult to draw, the digital age calls for a rethinking of alternative media. Although it is good to have ordinary members of society as producers rather than passive consumers of news, that situation also presents its unique challenges. This situation may lead to poorly researched and superficial news stories. Due to a lack of regulation and gate-keeping in the social media space, these platforms are heavily criticised for spreading unverified content (Kamp 2016). There has been an unprecedented rise in fake news in the age of new digital media. Most social media users do not verify the authenticity of their stories before they endorse or share them (ibid). Consequently, audiences tend to believe

news stories from established brand names, particularly traditional media houses. Other stories from alternative sources may be dismissed as fake or be subjected to verification. This may discredit those social movements in the space of creating their content on digital media platforms.

As much as social media can be considered alternative media, various writers have noted that social media may also give rise to some destructive elements (Morozov 2011; Unwin 2012), which include right-wing movements or terrorist groups that also use the internet to communicate their destructive intentions. The internet has played a prolific role in the organisation of hate groups and terrorist activities. One of the sub-questions posed in this study encapsulates the challenges impeding alternative media. Social media faces various challenges that may hamper its ability as an alternative media and those challenges include; the digital divide, commercialisation, and a self-centred approach.

### **2.3.9 The shift from traditional to new alternative media**

There is an ongoing debate about the perplexing question of whether digital media will replace traditional alternative media. Kupe (2021) indicated that in Africa, “the old media is not yet dead whilst the new media is not yet born.” The debate has been accelerated by the evolutionary and revolutionary approaches of new media. The evolutionists believe that new media have evolved out of the traditional media. This entails that the existing structures of new media emanate from the traditional forms of media. Scholars like Castells (2012) and Shirky (2008) predicted that new media will ultimately take over the traditional form of media.

The debate on whether digital media will replace traditional alternative media is alluded to in a study conducted by Chiumbu (2012), which analysed how the anti-eviction movement in South Africa used mobile phones to coordinate their campaigns. The article investigated the extent to which social movements re-appropriate mobile phones to amplify their traditional model of activism in order to meet their daily communication needs. Chiumbu (2012:195) argues that “mobile phones amplify existing communication methods rather than attenuating them.” This entails that social activists use mobile phones to supplement various modes of traditional mobilisation. This finding is very useful in the contextualisation of the research problem since one

of the key objectives in the broader research problem is trying to unpack the extent to which social media can act as an alternative media. The glaring gap that was identified was related to the extent to which that study focused on the general usage of mobile phones rather than social media applications. It is imperative to have continuous research to address the rapid changes occurring in the area of new media.

The argument that mobile phones supplement the traditional method of mobilisation is also supported by Van Dijk (2012) who argues that modern technologies are more evolutionary than revolutionary. This means that the new media technologies of today have evolved out of traditional media. The evolutionary approach presupposes the advancement of existing power structures. However, Castells (2004) tends to differ from the evolutionary approach by describing the age of ICT as a revolution. In this sense, the author believes that the new ICT age will change the way people conduct their daily activities. It is in the interest of the study to contest the evolutionary and revolutionary approach of alternative media.

## **2.4 The social movement in the age of social media**

Whilst part two of the literature review focused on the genesis of alternative media and how it transcends the digital age, part three reviews literature related to social media and how it empowers social movements. In contextualising social media, the basic understanding of social media will be expounded. Understanding social media helps in locating the role that it can play as an alternative media. This section also delves into the discussion of the digital social movement, such as the Arab Springs that caught the world by surprise in 2011. The focus here is on locating the literature relating to how various social movements have adopted digital platforms as their alternative media. The literature also explores the debates related to how social media can lead to social changes and the establishment of democracy in countries led by repressive regimes. Whilst the discussion of social media as an alternative media for social movement has focused on the emancipatory nature of social media, issues around the digital divide and the myriad of challenges that continue to hamper social media are often ignored. It is crucial to also review literature related to the challenges of social media because this can play a detrimental role with regard to how social movements can adopt digital platforms as their alternative media.



### 2.4.1 Social media in context

It is paramount to start by understanding the concept of social media. The following section contextualises social media and demonstrates the extent to which the researcher is interested in researching social media. Contrary to the popular belief that social media was introduced around 2004, Fuchs (2014a) has provided evidence that traces the introduction of social media back to the 1990s. The arrival of blogs in the 1990s could be seen as the emergence of social media. The emergence of blogs was soon followed by other forms of social media such as wiki technologies (1995), and social networks such as *Classmates* (1995) and *Sixdegrees* (1997) (ibid). This dismisses the widely held beliefs that the arrival of social networking sites such as *Facebook* marked the emergence of social media. However, it cannot be denied that popular social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* have amplified the concept of social media. Social media present new opportunities and challenges to their users; as such, the researcher, who has a background in communication and media studies, has identified a research problem that conflates the idea of social media and alternative media.

In contextualising social media, the following section provides the definition of the concept. Obar and Wildman (2015) indicate that there are challenges in defining social media due to the complex platforms that encompass the concept. The situation is also convoluted by the rapid rate at which technological advancement is taking place. Nevertheless, Shirky (2008: 20) has defined social media as a system that “increases our ability to share, to co-operate with one another and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organisations.” This definition is still relevant as it encompasses everything that constitutes social media. Amidst the dilemma encountered in defining social media, Obar and Wildman (2015) have broken down the definition of social media into four defining characteristics. Firstly, social media are classified as Web 2.0 applications that are interactive. The second defining feature is that the survival of social media relies on user-generated content. Thirdly, social media allows individuals and groups to create user-specific profiles, and lastly, the social media platform enables online interactions by connecting various individuals and groups on its sites.

It is indisputable that social media or new media technology has been the greatest invention that has happened in the history of media. This section reviews various studies that speak to the opportunities of social media in uplifting underprivileged communities. Van Dijk (2012) identifies convergence and interactivity as some of the key features of the new media. Convergence means the integration of previously distinct technologies into one medium. This makes it possible to access the audio, video, and print material within the same medium such as a tablet, smartphone or smart TV. The power of convergence can be demonstrated by social media applications such as *WhatsApp*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *YouTube*, *TikTok*, *Facebook* and many other platforms that allow people to share pictures, texts, voices, and videos.

In addition, the other advantage of social media which is worth noting, is called interactivity (Van Dijk 2012). Digital media technologies are interactive in the sense that communication is no longer a one-way but a two-way process. This defies the linear method of communication because both the sender and the receiver are active participants in creating media messages. Gone are those days when audiences were passive participants without the power to shape the content they were given. Many social media platforms are interactive, as they provide two-way discussions between individual profiles. While this is good, emerging scholarly views from Fenton and Barrassi (2011) have cautioned about the ability of interactive platforms to advance organised politics. Fenton and Barrasi (2011) subscribe to the idea that it is very difficult for various groupings to organise themselves in an environment that is characterised by self-centredness. This has often resulted in what is called the 'politics of individuation' because the individuals are acting alone rather than as a collective (ibid). This perplexing nature of social media is further discussed in the following section.

#### **2.4.2 The perplexing nature of social media**

In an attempt to understand the perplexing nature of social media, Kwak et al. (2010) conducted a study contesting the idea of *Twitter* as a social network or news medium. This study was conducted around 2009 barely three years after the introduction of *Twitter*. Kwak et al (2010) study provides a foundational analysis of *Twitter* and its lineage. In this sense, the study browsed 41.7 million user profiles, 1.47 billion social relations, 4262 trending topics, and 106 million tweets. The findings demonstrated that

the pattern of the follower-following relationship was different from the known characteristics of social networks of a reciprocal relationship. These hierarchies in the follower-following relationship emulate the real-life social relationship where celebrities and top figures have a lot of followers that they do not follow back. Kwak et al. (2010) found that there were 22.1% of reciprocal relationships within *Twitter*. This is considered very low compared to other social networks like *Flickr* (68%), and Yahoo (84%). *Facebook*, on the other side, does not require reciprocation since friends follow each other by default (this excludes *Facebook* fan pages where there is an asymmetrical relationship). Gladwell (2010) further illustrated this finding by indicating that social connections on social media are built along with 'weak ties.' This means that social media users are followed or follow people they never met. Therefore, Gladwell (2010) concludes that social media cannot be the best tool for activism since the networks consist of weak ties.

#### **2.4.3 The role of social media in news dissemination**

On the question of whether *Twitter* is a social network or a news medium, Kwak et al. (2010) perceived *Twitter* as a social network that plays an important role in the distribution of news. Kwak et al. (2010) indicate that *Twitter* shadows the news media or vice versa. These researchers indicate that 85% of the trending topics on *Twitter* are headline news that dominates the mainstream media. The preponderance of mainstream news sites and journalists on *Twitter* attests to a supplementary relationship between *Twitter* and news media. Mainstream media use *Twitter* to distribute the news and their journalists are present on *Twitter* in order to collect news stories. They normally look at the trending topics within *Twitter* to create new stories or consolidate existing ones. This phenomenon is also supported by Daniels (2016) who indicated that journalists were story-takers during the *#feesmustfall* protest in South Africa.

*Twitter* is also found to be a common medium for breaking news. Kwak et al. (2010: 595) also posit that *Twitter* does not only function as a space for mainstream media or famous celebrities. Thus, it is indicated that some individuals' profiles on *Twitter* have gained popularity for reporting on or active tweeting about specific events. This demonstrates that many people go to *Twitter* to look for information or news about specific events. Kwak et al. (2010) also add that *Twitter* has a dynamic of alternative

media as unpopular *Twitter* users can be re-tweeted to a larger audience. Therefore, the re-tweet button is regarded as the most important feature that can disseminate information quickly to a large audience. The extent to which social media is used in creating and disseminating news has intrigued the researcher to look at the potential of social media as an alternative media suitable for communicating subaltern politics.

#### **2.4.4 Digital social movements: A global perspective**

This section reviews the literature on how contemporary social movements use new media to organise themselves and publicise their discourses. Gerbaudo (2012) has challenged the idea of a digital social movement which, in this case, entails a social movement that digitally organises its affairs. He argues that it will be entirely difficult for such movements to effect social change. As such, the social movement should be able to coordinate its affairs both online and offline (Gerbaudo 2012). However, there is no doubt that the era of digital media has taken social movements to another level.

Internet is a very effective mode of communication between activists. It can link them together, facilitate interaction between them and mobilise them to assemble in one place at short notice. This can result in activities that wins both media and public attention (Curran 2012: 14 - 15).

However, it remains a prerequisite for the activists to have access to the internet for them to make a meaningful contribution online. Since this study is interested in determining the extent to which social movements use social media as alternative media, the phenomenon of access to the internet ought to be examined as well.

Due to the lack of mainstream media coverage, social movement activists are increasingly using digital tools to intensify their participation in democratic engagements and to speak back to power. The arrival of social media has opened various platforms for members of social movements to communicate with each other instantly. According to Kamp (2016: 1), “social media can help citizens explore new ways of cooperation and collective action, they can provide opportunities for mobilising people around the common cause or for sensitising the public on specific issues.” This entails that social media has accelerated the rate at which ordinary members of society are communicating with each other to organise themselves round a common cause.

The element of objectivity that has been lacking in traditional mainstream media is

something that sets social media apart. Kamp (2016) indicated that the era of social media has brought to the fore topics that were previously ignored by the mainstream media. In this case, stories involving social movements were trivialised by the traditional mainstream media. This argument was also echoed by Matsilele and Ruhanya (2021) who indicated that social media is a crucial platform for dissidents whose views have been rejected by the mainstream media. However, various governments are beginning to use State machinery to counter the power of social media. Matsilele and Ruhanya (2021) demonstrated the extent to which the Zimbabwean government has started suppressing social media dissidents. Mutsvairo (2016) also reiterates that repressive regimes are more likely to regulate or restrict social media platforms that are used to challenge their power. It is also possible that some countries are deliberately slowing down the provision of the internet in an attempt to maintain the status quo. Historically, the apartheid government in South Africa also tried to delay the introduction of television due to fear about its impact on cultures.

Various authors indicate that social movements that are more likely to voice their concerns via protests were also dismissed as violent and uninformed without delving into the philosophical validations of their actions (Bailey et al. 2008: 16; Poell and Borra 2011). In most cases, the mainstream media prioritise the economic and political elites as their news sources at the expense of social activists. As a result, the protesters were always represented with a condescending or dismissive nature. Social media has the potential to change this phenomenon.

Although social media has amplified underground and oppositional media, Mano and Mukhungu (2016) indicated that the use of social media as alternative media in Africa is limiting because it is embedded in a capitalistic mode of production. This signifies various challenges that may undermine the effectiveness of social media in disseminating alternative discourses. A study conducted by Chiumbu (2012) indicated that social movements are often threatened by the lack of coordination between various movements fighting for the same cause. This sentiment is also shared by Fenton and Barrasi (2011) who argue that social media may also instigate the disappearance of group identities. They observed that individuals are becoming more self-centred rather than working as a collective entity in the era of social media.

Understandably, it is very difficult to reach a consensus in an environment where individualism dominates collectivism. Nevertheless, digital social movements were given credit for various events that led to political and economic changes during the Arab Springs or Occupy Wall Street movement protests.

#### **2.4.5 Social media activism in Africa**

There is a plurality of studies perceiving social media as a tool for advancing activism (Aouragh 2012; Bosch, 2016; Daniels 2016; Matsilele and Ruhanya 2021; Mutsvairo 2016). Many of these studies were conducted after the Arab Springs protest. Within the South African context, social media activism is a formidable phenomenon that has been accelerated by the *#Rhodesmustfall* and *#feesmustfall* protests which captured the attention of academics and writers. Bosch's (2016) study argued that *Twitter* allowed students to participate in politics as it was used as an organising tool by students who were involved in the *#feesmustfall* protest. The study indicated that *Twitter* was used by students all over the country to organise sit-ins, meetings, and marches. The other crucial role played by *Twitter* involves disseminating information to the public, informing each other about the protest's activities, bridging the distance between protesters, and drawing sympathy from various stakeholders (ibid). In addition, it was also possible for the students to use *Twitter* to quickly mobilise a large number of supporters during mass protests and gatherings. In this case, students at various South African universities also mobilised other students via *Twitter* to occupy university spaces and buildings.

On the other side, Bosch (2016) also indicated that parents and academics also used *Twitter* to express solidarity through tweeting and re-tweeting solidarity messages to students. With this in mind, Bosch (2016: 170) concluded that *Twitter* was a potential space of "radical citizenship in response to citizen (youth) exclusion from formal spaces of political participation." Similar sentiments are also expounded in Bosch (2017a) study tackling the *#Rhodesmustfall* protest in Cape Town. Bosch (2017a) indicated that social media was central to the student movement in South Africa. With specific reference to the *#Rhodesmustfall* movement, Bosch (2017a: 229) argues that "*Twitter* certainly created a space for the voicing of Black pain in ways that we did not see in any other medium or social space, mediated or otherwise." Evidently, this represents an incredible form of activism because anyone can join *Twitter* and express

their opinions.

The use of social media for purposes of activism is visible throughout the African continent, where it is used chiefly to challenge hegemonic power. In Zimbabwe, for instance, Matsilele and Ruhanya (2021) investigated the issue of social media dissidents in Zimbabwe. The study found that social media is an essential platform for dissident voices. Similar views were held by Mpofu (2014) who looked at the online diasporic media platforms in Zimbabwe. Social media was also used extensively in Egypt during the Arab Springs protest (Gerbaudo 2012; Auoragh and Alexander 2011). Whilst the power of social media is indisputable, critical scholars such as Fuchs (2014a), Mutsvairo (2016), Auoragh and Alexander (2011), and Gerbaudo (2012) have challenged what they viewed to be simplistic ideas about the emancipatory power of social media. These scholars have challenged the idea of positioning social media at the centre of protest. In this case, they also recognise the role that organisers play in organising the protest by situating it within its historical context which was mostly offline (Gerbaudo 2012; Gladwell 2010; Mutsvairo 2016). The prime example includes the notable success registered by the political uprising that took place during apartheid South Africa, albeit it being offline.

In understanding social media activism, Mutsvairo's (2016) book titled *Digital activism in the social media era* is highly intriguing as it provides a critical understanding of the phenomenon within the Sub-Saharan African context. Contrary to the technological determinist view that Africans use social media to challenge the status quo of dictatorship, Mutsvairo (2016) indicated that many Africans are still excluded because of a lack of compatible devices and/or the internet. Due to poverty, many people would rather prioritise their most immediate needs than get involved in online activism. As such, Mutsvairo (2016) notes that several governments in Africa are not bothered by communication that is happening online because they still have control of mainstream media, which is considered influential to socio-economic and political issues. Once online media have gained influence, the political leadership has the power to arrest or detain anyone using such platforms and in the worst-case scenario, they can regulate and restrict access to these platforms. Therefore, Mutsvairo (2016) concludes by dispelling the myth that activism is a product of social media. It is important to note that activism has been there for a long time and has been used to annihilate slavery,

apartheid and colonialism. In most instances, successful activism is a result of both online and offline activities (Auragh 2012; Auragh and Alexander 2011; Bardici 2012; Gerbaudo 2012; Wilson and Dunn 2012). Therefore, this research investigates the extent to which social media can act as an alternative media within the South African context.

#### **2.4.6 Does social media cause revolutions or social change?**

There have been lots of prognostications that seem to suggest that social media will cause revolutions or social change. Since the advent of the internet, Curran (2012) has noted some celebratory discourse that emanated from what Schiller (1999) called the cybercornucopia. In Egypt, Gerbaudo (2012) has noted some narratives that seemed to suggest that the Egyptian revolution was a social media revolution, whilst others called it a *Twitter* protest or *Facebook* protest. Journalists and other writers who are techno-optimists were highly active in this celebratory discourse. O'Sullivan (2009) wrote the most popular blog titled 'revolutions will be Tweeted.' This blog post suggested that *Twitter* would cause a revolution in Iran. This was followed by another blog by Smith (2011) titled: 'Egypt *Facebook* revolution: Wael Ghonim thanks the social network.' Other scholars also believe in the revolutionary nature of social media (Castells 2012; Shirky 2008). However, the view that social media creates revolution was critically challenged by scholars who believed in the social construction of social media (Morozov 2011; Gladwell 2010; Fuchs 2014a; Wilson and Dunn 2011; Auragh 2012; Curran 2012). The social constructivists believe that the impacts of social media were overstated and devoid of any empirical evidence.

Various scholars have conducted empirical studies that looked into the impact of social media during the revolutions (Bardici 2012; Auragh 2012; Wilson and Dunn 2011; Fuchs 2014b). The study by Wilson and Dunn (2011) investigated the potential of the internet to topple dictators, using Egypt as the case study. A survey involving a variety of social movement activists was conducted during the Egyptian protest in 2011. The study found that television (92%) and phones (82%) were the dominant modes of communication during the protest. On the other hand, social media platforms were the less dominant mode of communication during the protest (*Facebook* 42%, *Twitter* 13% and blogs 12%). This study was largely quantitative and the responses did not reveal the underlying feelings of the activists. In this current study, the researcher has



adopted the qualitative approach to reveal the underlying feelings of activists.

Qualitative studies conducted by Aouragh and Alexander (2011) and Gerbaudo (2012) on the Egyptian revolution attempted to close the knowledge gap. Aouragh and Alexander (2011) indicate that Egyptian activists reject the simplistic view that social media played the most important role during their protest. They believe that the success of the protest should be credited to millions of protestors who, despite the dangers of confronting the autocratic regime, braved themselves for the protest. Aouragh and Alexander (2011) also indicate that the narrative that social media was central to the protest emanates from Western characteristics that have no connections with the Egyptian protest that has been in the making for almost 10 years. The study also indicated that there was an uptake of *Facebook* in the run-up to the protest, which portrays the notion that the internet has the power to activate collective dissent. However, the internet was not the only mode of organisation for the protest (ibid). Similar views were also held by Mutsvairo (2016). The conclusion that can be drawn from these studies is that social media was not central to the protest as many have theorised.

Gerbaudo (2012) also holds a cautionary view about the impact of social media during protests. He conducted a study that looked into social movements in three different countries – the Arab Springs in Egypt, the ‘Indignados in Spain and the Occupy Wall Street Movement in the United States. Whilst social media have impacted social movements, Gerbaudo (2012: 12) argues that such impact was often exaggerated by techno-optimists who provided a simplistic understanding of the complex issue. Rather than giving too much credit to social media, Gerbaudo (2012) indicated that the internet alone does not constitute a solution:

The success of the movement still lies to a great extent in the organisational skill of its activist and their capacity to create a compelling sense of togetherness capable of initiating the coalescence of a desperate constituency (Gerbaudo 2012: 158).

In this case, the leadership of each movement should play a crucial role in directing the movement using social media and other platforms such as flyers and posters, to reach out to many offline people. To show that the potential of social media was often

exaggerated, various studies have illustrated the Egyptian situation when the social movement continued with its affairs after the Mubarak regime had switched off the internet (Auoragh and Alexander 2011; Gerbaudo 2012). The fact that the social movement's activities continued unabated after the Egyptian government switched off the internet dispels the myth around *Twitter* protests and the *Facebook* revolution.

The study conducted by Fuchs (2014b) depicts the situation differently. The survey relating to Occupy Wall Street revealed that face-to-face communication and the internet functioned as the dominant forms of communication (Fuchs 2014b). This evidence reveals that the effects of social media during protests always differ depending on various demographic details such as location, class, race, gender, culture and social dynamics. This entails that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to studying social media and its effects during protests. As such, the researcher proposes to conduct interviews with the members of the six selected social movements in order to obtain first-hand knowledge of how these movements use social media as an alternative media within the South African context.

As claimed by Castells (2012), the Arab Springs and Occupy Wall Street protests were created by social media. The organisers and participants of the Arab Springs movement used social media to communicate and share information. Within South Africa, Daniels (2016) also posits that the use of social media during the *#feesmustfall* movement has resulted in social changes. In this case, the *#feesmustfall* and *#Rhodesmustfall* protests have respectively led to a zero per cent fee increase and the removal of Rhodes' statue at UCT. This portrays social media as an essential tool that can be used by various formations such as grassroots movements for mobilisation purposes. Nevertheless, Daniels (2016) also acknowledges that *Twitter* is still an elite medium accessed by those who have access to the internet. Many South Africans who are at the periphery of society are not part of the *Twitter*-sphere. The same cannot be said about university students who have access to computers and Wi-fi within the university spaces. Students' educational status also allows them to navigate social media platforms and write creatively and critically.

According to Bardici (2012), social media, such as *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter*, have played a significant role in enhancing the political transformation in Egypt. Bardici (2012) indicated that the real impact of social media in terms of bringing about political

transformation and its impact is a phenomenon that is too complicated to measure. The real impact of social media during the Egyptian revolution was overstated by journalists (Bardici 2012; Gerbaudo 2012). This view is also supported by Aouragh (2012: 529) who indicated that “overt fascination of social media gave the impression that the revolutions were mainly middle class and secular.” Bennett (2003) also brings the element of human agency into this debate by arguing that the internet does not change who people are or what they do together. This view takes into consideration the human capacity to bring about social change and the social construction of technology. This entails that technology is a product of human capability, which cannot function outside of human beings.

#### **2.4.7 Social media and politics**

The literature relating to social media and politics should be reviewed because the study is concerned with how social movements can use social media as an alternative media to get involved in politics and fight for a better allocation of resources. South African social movements are entangled in political struggles that bring about the emancipation of the unemployed, the landless, and the marginalised. In this case, this section endeavours to look at various studies that conflate social media and the broad topic of politics.

A variety of literature in South Africa seeks to understand the role of social media in politics (Bosch 2013; Mhlomi and Osunkunle 2017; Mukhudwana 2020). Mhlomi and Osunkunle (2017) sought to understand the role of social media and youth participation in politics. The findings of this study reveal that social media has played a crucial role in political campaigns by allowing them to engage with politicians or political engagement, thus making them interested in political participation. On the other side, Bosch (2013) also studied the South African youth’s use of *Facebook* to participate in politics. Bosch (2013) argues that social media enables the youth to be involved in alternative forms of activism rather than mainstream politics. This entails that youths are involved in a fragmented form of politics, which is often individualised. This echoes what Fenton and Barrasi (2011) alluded to as the politics of individuation or what Curran (2012) calls individualism. This entails that the individual users of social media are working in isolation rather than as a collective entity. Various scholars have demonstrated that relationships on social media are built on weak bonds (Gladwell

2010; Kwak et al. 2010). This means that *Twitter* users, for instance, are likely to follow or be followed by people they have never met, thus creating weak ties. Therefore, participation in politics requires strong bonds and collective identity which are lacking on social media.

In seeking to understand the multifaceted role of social media on politics, Mukhudwana (2020) conducted a study which investigated the extent to which *Twitter* accounts of politicians' such as Cyril Ramaphosa, Julius Malema, Mmusi Maimane and Bantu Holomisa portrayed some elements of echo-chambers, homophily and populism during the #Zumamustfall campaign. The study's findings revealed the existence of elements of homophily and echo-chamber, but such homophily was not rigid as it was often penetrable (Mukhudwana 2020). The study also revealed the causal link between homophily and populism. Furthermore, the study confirmed the postulations that social media is a paradoxical medium that cannot be understood by a solitary study. The discussion on politics is closely linked to the discussion on democracy, which is presented in the subsection below.

#### **2.4.8 Social media and democracy**

The arrival of social media has reinvigorated the age-old debate of whether or not the media can contribute to democracy. In this context, democracy is a system of governance that takes into cognisance the multiplicity of voices, though it is not a perfect system of governance on its own, but the least acceptable phenomenon worldwide. Social media, with its potential to place the agenda-setting at the hands of the citizens, has been widely accepted as a tool that can accelerate participatory citizenship, which is a critical component of democracy. Jenkins (2008: 331) defines participatory culture as the extent to which "fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content." The concept of participatory culture is linked to the concept of democracy. Although the study is not concerned with the democratic role of the media, the use of social media by social movements has largely been linked to democratic participation. This section reviews various scholarly works that have deliberated on this topical issue. The key principle of democracy, which is also enacted in Section 16 of the Constitution of South Africa (1996), is the ability to receive and impart information with no frontiers. Social media has accelerated the rights to freedom of expression due to its interactivity and

convergence. In this case, social media is responsible for setting an agenda for the majority in an environment dominated by the traditional mainstream media (Kamp 2016). The rise of social media and its accessibility has led many scholars, such as Castells (2012) and Jenkins (2008), to believe that the digital era will breed new forms of democracy.

The ability of the media to enable its users to be involved in the creation of texts and cultural messages is referred to as participatory culture (Jenkins 2008). The concept of participatory culture has culminated in the belief that social media is a democratic space since the audiences are active participants who are involved in creating cultural symbols and texts. According to Kamau (2017), social media ought to be a tool for democracy due to its ability to allow engagement and participatory culture. Within the context of South Africa, Daniels (2016: 182), who used the radical democracy model to scrutinise hashtag activism, argued that “hashtag activism took place through the radical democracy’s leitmotif of the inclusion of more voices contributing towards more diversity.” This has eventually led to a situation where the students can reclaim the power and lead from below. *Twitter* is therefore seen as contributing toward participatory citizenship and the deepening of democracy.

The assertion that social media is a democratic space because it allows diverse views to exist has been heavily criticised by critical scholars like Curran (2012), Fuchs (2014a), Unwin (2012), Morozov (2011), Mpofu-Walsh (2021), and Zuboff (2019). In his book titled *Social Media: A critical introduction*, Fuchs (2014a) found the idea that social media allows societies to be more democratic to be reductionist. Fuchs (2014a) argues that the proponents of the view that social media enhances democracy do not take into consideration the economic model, ownership structures, and the desire for profit motives of those who created social media spaces. In this critical analysis of social media as a democratic space, Fuchs (2014a: 55) argues that “corporate platforms owned by *Facebook*, *Google* and other large companies strongly mediate the cultural expressions of the internet users.” The economic decisions that are made within these companies exclude the users of social media, who are only seen as tradable commodities by selling their data to advertisers whilst advancing the capitalist model. Because of the desire by corporations to accumulate capital by exploiting and commodifying users, Fuchs (2014a) has reiterated that social media can never be

considered a participatory culture. Fuchs (2014a), therefore, suggests that true participatory media must embrace a diversity of ownership and resist corporate capture. He believes that non-commercial internet projects like Wikipedia and Diaspora represent the best sites where participatory culture can thrive (ibid). Holistic participation entails that societies should exercise the right to govern and control structures affecting them.

Likewise, other scholars are concerned about digital capitalism which is considered a threat to democratic ideals (Schiller 1999; Zuboff 2019). Apart from being used as a surveillance system, social media are becoming so coercive that they will cost us our human nature (Zuboff 2019). In addition, Zuboff (2019: 19) indicated that “surveillance capitalism is best described as a coup from above which is not the overthrow of the state but rather an overthrow of people’s sovereignty.” This entails that people who consciously use the internet may be surrendering their sovereignty to the big firms that are susceptible to behavioural modifications. Mpofu-Walsh (2021) indicated that social media algorithms present information that they think will engage their users the most based on the wealth of data they collect about users. It has been proven that through algorithms, social media giants can influence people’s decisions during elections.

In addition, Unwin (2012) indicated that the assertion that social media is making the political process more democratic is mostly supported by anecdotal evidence. The author further illustrates that although social media has many benefits, these may not be in the best interest of democracy or the marginalised. Although a large number of people use social media, having access to it does not necessarily translate into enhancing the democratic process. The concentration of internet ownership is seen as a threat to democratic processes. Mpofu-Walsh (2021) indicated that the concentration of power, which lies outside our borders, poses new challenges and threats. The power of social media, which is vested in the hands of private individuals, has raised concerns about the democratic role of these institutions (Mpofu-Walsh 2021). In this case, the agenda-setting of news is now decided in Silicon Valley by institutions that are not democratically elected. Such institutions have no interest in the people at hand. Unwin (2012) argues that to ensure that democracy thrives, the control of internet ownership should be more democratic as well.

Recently, there has been a growing body of literature that cautioned about the dark

side of the internet – the extent to which social media, which is an extension of the internet, can be used to counter democracy (Kamau 2017; Morozov 2011; Mpofu-Walsh 2021; Unwin 2012; Zuboff 2019). Due to the lack of traditional gate-keeping practices, Kamau (2017) argue that social media may become a threat to democracy due to the emerging trends of fake news, cyber-bullying, propaganda and disinformation. The era in which fake news appeals more than facts is described as the era of post-truth. It is believed that the post-truth era may help entrench right-wing politics when users with extreme views and biases find their place on social media (Kamau 2017). Mpofu-Walsh (2021) has demonstrated the extent to which far-right interest groups have harnessed new media to create an eco-system of misinformation that is of a similar magnitude to apartheid propaganda.

Curran (2012) also added his voice regarding the potential of the internet to enhance democracy. According to Curran (2012), the internet does not give birth to a new kind of politics but simply accelerates old politics. This view is also enunciated by Mpofu-Walsh (2021) who believes that the new digital media also interacts with apartheid power. A situation where the algorithm decides what users should view or who they should engage with is a great concern for a polarised country like South Africa. Mpofu-Walsh (2021) believes that algorithms are not innocent technological inventions but powerful tool that interacts with social power. Digital media are capable of entrenching issues of inequality and apartheid (See Nakamura and Chow-White 2012).

In addition, social media algorithms are likely to create a situation of homophily. Homophily is a situation where social media algorithms recommend content from users who look alike, who leave near each other and believe in the same cause. As discussed previously, Mukhudwana (2020) has also expressed concern about the principles of homophily, echo-chamber and populism that have permeated social media. The concern arises from the fact that people are most likely to be presented with political leaders who resemble them. This has created a large base of blind followers who cannot challenge the dominant narratives. Mpofu-Walsh (2021) believes that homophily reinforces patterns of racial segregation where the physical problem of racial injustice is now mirrored in the digital echo-chambers. On the other hand, Mukhudwana (2020) indicated that homophily and echo-chambers are likely to create an uninformed citizenry, personalised politics, and people who are not exposed to

alternative ideas. This further demonstrates the extent to which social media can create a polarised citizenry that is not exposed to diverse opinions.

#### **2.4.9 Saving the internet**

The concerns around the moral and ethical issues of the internet and social media have led scholars to propose various interventions (Unterberger and Fuchs 2021; Gehl 2015). Such interventions include the Public Service Media and Internet (PSMI) Manifesto, which calls for a public service media that safeguards democratic ideals (Unterberger and Fuchs 2021). Such public service media should strive to advance the principles of equality, fairness, participation, civic dialogue and engagement on the internet by including a range of previously excluded voices (Unterberger and Fuchs 2021). What differentiates the proposed model of public service media from the current models is the financial component. Whilst the current models are privately owned and increasingly commercialised, the public service model should be publicly funded. Although the idea of public service sounds noble, the public service model within South Africa has its fair share of challenges. Ngwenya (2015) has already cautioned about the public service broadcasting that has a power inextricably linked to the State and the global power matrix.

On the other side, Gehl (2015) has proposed alternative social media as a solution to counter corporate social media that are increasingly becoming commercialised and centralised. This entails that current social media which are owned by global conglomerates, do not represent the aspirations of the politically marginalised beings. In this case, alternative social media “can be seen as a critical response to corporate social media that not only allows for users to share content with one another but also denies the commercialisation of speech, allows users more access to shape the underlying technical infrastructure and radically experiment with surveillance regimes” (Gehl 2015: 2). This suggests that alternative social media refuse to be part of the dominant internet structures that characterise the internet today. In this case, Gehl (2015) argues that the refusal of advertisements is to prevent those with lots of money from being the loudest voices in digital media. He identified decentralised sites such as GNU social, Galaxy2, Diaspora, and Lorea as some of the alternative social media platforms that give equal access to their users. Whilst the concept of social media alternatives has been widely explored in the West, there is a vacuum of literature



relating to this phenomenon within the African context. African countries are left behind within the context of the digital arena.

#### **2.4.10 Digital Apartheid**

This study acknowledges the potential that social media has in allowing the presentation of diverse voices; however, social media on its own is not universal. Various studies have cited the issue of digital inequalities as a challenge within an African context (Daniels 2016; Kupe 2021; Lloyd et al. 2010; Moyo 2007, 2011 & 2018; Mutsvairo 2016). Whilst social media presents many opportunities for various groups to enhance their communication experience, there is a variety of factors that may hamper such an experience. One of the foremost issues that affect most countries in the Global South is the digital divide (the world of binaries). Africans, in particular, have not seized all the opportunities presented by digital technologies to voice their subaltern politics (Mutsvairo 2016; Moyo 2018). This is largely due to the digital divide, which is seen as a hindrance to people's connection to the networks. Lack of access to information can lead to loss of opportunities, which perpetuates the status quo. Access to information is also declared as a fundamental human right by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Article 19, which declares that everyone has the right to receive and impart information without frontiers. Social media will not affect social change when others are deprived of access due to their economic status.

Kupe (2021) demonstrates that the challenge that faces the new media is digital inequality which emulates the intersectionality of gender, race, as well as geographical and economic inequality. This entails that some people have more access to information than others. In South Africa, the higher prices of data are also a barrier to entrants (Kupe 2021). During the state of the nation address (SONA) held on 20 February 2020, President Ramaphosa cited the highest cost of data as a challenge that deserved urgent attention (SONA 2020). Apart from the high cost of data, low penetration of broadband networks in rural areas was another challenge. This phenomenon in which telecommunications infrastructure is concentrated in urban areas is characterised as electronic redlining (Sewchurran 2016). As a result of electronic redlining, the newest telecommunication technologies such as fibre and 5G networks that enable faster communication, are skewed toward the urban populace.

The unequal access to information is seen as a challenge because this can prevent social media from playing the anticipated role of empowering the subalterns.

#### **2.4.11 Social media participation**

Theoretically, social media ought to give everyone the voice to communicate their discourses, but in practice, the role of social media is constrained due to various limitations. The issue of inequality is one of the major limitations prohibiting access to social media. Curran (2012) indicated that the internet does not empower low-income households because it is mostly the elite that tend to be most active in politics. Curran (2012) also adds that the discourses of activist groups are also lost on the internet because their statement tends to get lower search engine listings than corporate sites. These imbalances are likely to have an effect on social media users who participate in online activism. This has already raised some suspicions relating to the role of social media in democratisation and politics. Democracy is an inclusive process that strives to give everyone an equal voice against the background of social media spaces that are characterised by inequalities.

In contemporary times, social media has become a tool used by the elites to maintain their power. Fenton (2017: 125) indicated that “the more powerful and influential you are, the better placed you are to get your message across.” Social media has pushed this phenomenon to a new height. Ten per cent of *Twitter* users generate ninety per cent of the content (Heil and Piskorki 2009 cited in Fenton 2012). The top 10% of *Twitter* users are dominated by celebrities, politicians and mainstream media houses like CNN (Fenton 2012; Fuchs 2017). Ninety-seven per cent of *Twitter* users have fewer than 100 followers (Infographic 2010 cited in Fenton 2012: 127). This demonstrates some imbalances existing in the social media space. The question of whether participation in social media can lead to meaningful democratic engagement is open to various interpretations and requires critical and empirical scholarly interrogation.

On the other hand, Pillay and Maharaj (2014) conducted a study that investigated social media and the adoption of mobile communication by civil society using the theoretical underpinning of diffusion of innovations. The study found that there is a low level of adoption of social media and communication technology by the civil society

grouping. This low uptake of digital services was largely attributed to socio-economic activities and the higher cost of communication. The result of Pillay and Maharaj (2014) study cannot be ignored because the social and economic landscapes in South Africa remain unchanged. The data from Statista (2021) indicated that only 64% of the population is connected to the internet.

In analysing the low uptake of communication technology in South Africa, Pillay and Maharaj (2014) have also demonstrated a correlation between the low uptake of technology and the country's GDP per capita. Countries with low GDP per capita are likely to experience low adoption of technology. According to the World Bank (2021), the average per capita income is US\$6994 per annum (approximately R122 185). Based on the World Bank definition, South Africa is considered a middle-income country because its per capita income per annum is between US\$ 6,102 and US\$ 10,835. The low uptake of social media is exacerbated by the high levels of inequality and the high unemployment rates. In South Africa, the gap between the rich and the poor appears to be growing due to inequality and the high unemployment rate of 32.9% (Statistics SA 2022). The high cost of communication also aggravates the low adoption of technology. If social media continues to be accessed along the lines of 'haves' and 'have-nots', it is improbable that the subalterns will use it to advance participatory citizenship.

What is emerging during the Fourth Industrial Revolution is that the largest beneficiaries of this era are the investors, shareholders and skilled innovators (Schwab 2016). Forbes Magazine (2021) indicated that the top ten wealthiest people on earth include tech billionaires such as Jeff Bezos of *Amazon*, Elon Musk of *Tesla* and *Twitter*, Bill Gates of *Microsoft*, Mark Zuckerberg of *Facebook*, Larry Ellison of *Oracle Corporation*, Larry Page of *Google*, and Sergey Brin of *Google*. This demonstrates the extent to which new technologies, which encompasses social media, are lucrative businesses which produced a number of billionaires. This tends to exacerbate the gap between the rich and the poor. The power of new media will be undermined when there is digital apartheid.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the literature review in three parts. The first part dealt with

the historical background of South African media during the colonial-cum-apartheid era, the transition to democracy and also the post-apartheid era. The discussion also indicated that the three historical epochs have witnessed some ideological shift that was made apparent by the power exchange. The histories of the press, which includes radio, television and digital media, were also embedded within this historical analysis. The second section of the literature review unpacked the meaning of alternative media as conceptualised by key scholars of alternative media, such as Atton (2002), Downing (2008), O'Sullivan (2010), Fuchs (2010), and Sandoval and Fuchs (2010). The researcher notes various terminologies denoting alternative media, thus presenting some intricacies in defining the concept. In trying to understand alternative media, the section goes further to discern between alternative and mainstream media which are characterised by a binary relationship. However, the digital age, which has made the lines between mainstream and alternative media to be very thin, depicts a paradoxical situation. The second section also provides the genesis of alternative media, which set the foundation for contemporary alternative media. Various debates relating to social media as an alternative media have also been presented to unveil contemporary studies relating to this phenomenon. The later part of the second section has also looked into the multifaceted depiction of alternative media which is often linked to community media, development communication, and agenda-setting. Finally, the second section also noted some of the legacy-related challenges of alternative media.

The third section of the literature review puts specific emphasis on providing a context of social media that is becoming influential in all the spheres of communication. To understand the ubiquitous concept of social media, a definition from Shirky (2008) Obar and Wildman (2015) were considered. The role of social media in news production was also unpacked to demonstrate the intricate nature of social media. The section also investigated the debates around the social movements that organised their affairs digitally. In addition, this section also looked into the social media activism that has permeated throughout Africa, but the effectiveness of such activism is subject to an academic probe. Contrary to the popular belief that social media causes revolutions or social change, this section also presents evidence that demystifies the role of social media in causing revolutions, social change or democracy (Gerbaudo 2012; Bardici 2012; Aouragh and Alexander 2012; Wilson and Dunn 2011; Fuchs 2014a; Mutsvairo 2016). The debates around the role of social media in revolutions,

social change and democracy are also tackled from the perspective of social constructivists. Finally, the literature review also delved into some of the challenges facing social media. Such a discussion has focused on the issues of the digital divide and the rapid commercialisation of social media.

## **CHAPTER THREE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS ALTERNATIVE MEDIA: THE THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Theories are systematic sets of interrelated statements intended to explain some aspect of social life (Babbie 2016: 44)

The above statement demonstrates the importance of theories in research. A theory helps researchers to derive a testable hypothesis or a proposition for a research problem. Therefore, it is crucial to review related theories that help predict and explain a specific phenomenon. Since this study is interested in determining the extent to which social media can become an alternative media for the subalterns, the study can be located under an umbrella of critical theories that traverses many social science theories. This chapter expands the theoretical base of the study by examining the theories from different dimensions. In this case, the study focuses on the history of the theory, the seminal author, emerging authors, key ideas conveyed by the theory and its criticism.

#### **Critical theories**

The umbrella theory underpinning this study is the Critical Theory, a sociological theory used to question the prevailing social issues. According to Fuchs (2017), critical theories examine all forms of domination and exploitation. Because the study explores the extent to which social movements use social media as an alternative media, it is imperative to employ a variety of critical theories to explain this phenomenon. The researcher reviewed the four Critical sub-theories: the Theory of the Network Society, the Public Sphere Theory, the Critical Political Economy Theory and the Post-colonial Subaltern Theory. These theories are inextricably linked and deemed to support the theoretical basis of this study.

The first theory to be reviewed is the Network Society Theory, which explains the relationship between the networks of power and society. The review of the theory also delves into the debates relating to technological determinist and social constructivist which are essential in evaluating the relationship between social media and society. Secondly, the Public Sphere Theory, which is more concerned about the circulation of public discussion without any frontiers, also informs the theoretical basis of this study.

The research also examines the applicability of the theory in the digital age. Thirdly, the Critical Political Economy Theory, which is very critical of capitalist structures that are driving the development of new technologies, is also explored in this study. The theory is derived from Karl Marx's approach to capital accumulation. As a result, this theoretical tradition proposes radical and critical media to counter the dominance of the mainstream media. Lastly, the study also looks at the Post-colonial Theory of Subaltern. The theory is also linked to the concept of digital inequality which is seen as accelerating the phenomenon of the digital subaltern. The digital divide, which manifests in multifaceted forms, is seen as a hindrance to the information society.

### **3.2 The Network Society Theory**

The Network Society Theory is also applicable to this study since the study is more concerned about the extent to which social media is becoming an alternative media for social movements. It is imperative to start with the definition of the concept of a network society in an attempt to show the relevance of this theory to the study. To have an in-depth understanding of the network society phenomenon, this section looks at the definition from a variety of approaches. The seminal authors of this theory, Van Dijk (2012) and Manuel Castells (2004) provided a clear definition of this concept. Van Dijk (2012:24) has defined network society as "a modern society with an infrastructure of social and media networks that characterises its mode of organisation at every level: individual, group and societal". Whereas Manuel Castells (2004:3) described network society as "a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronic-based information and communications technologies". In addition, Hassan (2004: 143) also defined this concept as "a historical trend whereby the dominant functions of society, that is to say, its economic, cultural and media processes, are increasingly organised around networks." The conclusion that can be drawn from the three definitions cited above is that network society is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century society where people are interconnected through ICT networks that are crucial to all spheres of life. The network society has transformed how media are produced, distributed and consumed. Therefore, the society that is not connected is excluded in all spheres of life, including the economy as well as globalisation and political discourses.

On the other front, McLuhan's (1962) idea of the global village provides the

foundational theory of the network society. Emphasis is placed on the dominant media of the 1960s, which shaped how people thought and behaved. McLuhan's (1962) ideas formed the theoretical foundation of this theory during the 1960s. Nevertheless, the term 'network society' was coined by Van Dijk in a book titled *De Netwerkmaatschappij* (1991). This Dutch title means network society. On the other hand, Manuel Castells has also written extensively about the network society. Some of his influential writings include *The Information Age Trilogy* which encompasses following books: *The Rise of Network Society*, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Volume I* (1996), *The power of identity*, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Volume II* (1997) and *The end of the Millennium*, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume III* (1998). The Information Age trilogy gave rise to the concept of the information society. It is also important to note that Castells was a sociologist who was heavily involved in social movements during his upbringing. Castells was involved with the anti-Franco movement in Spain during the 1960s. His activism got him into trouble with the authorities and he had to seek refuge in France (Castells and Ince 2003).

One of his books that followed *The Information Age Trilogy* is titled *Network of outrage and hope: Social movement in the internet age* is very useful in contextualising this study's theoretical underpinnings. This book was published subsequent to the internet-driven social movements such as Arab Springs and Occupy Wall Street movements. The book is instrumental as it gives Castells an account of social movement in the age of the internet, something he defined as 'networked social movements' (Castells 2012). The 'networked social movement' can be defined as internet-based movements. In this case, Castells argues that digital tools from the internet are necessary for mobilising protesters as well as organising and coordinating a protest movement. However, the view that suggests the internet has created the protest was not welcomed by critical social scholars such as Fuchs (2014a), who regarded the view as technologically deterministic and simplistic. Fuchs (2014a: 74) believes that "technology is one of many results of productive societal interactions of human beings." This demonstrates that, to some extent, social media cannot be regarded as the only factor that determines the conditions of the protest as the social movement activists are not limited to one method of mobilisation. In this case, social media can either dampen or intensify existing trends because the effects of social media are



always contradictory (ibid).

The network society has also led to the creation of a new paradigm called informationalism, which can be defined as “a technological paradigm based on the augmentation of the human capacity of information processing and communications made possible by the revolutions in microelectronics, software and genetic engineering” (Castells 2004: 9). What makes the current revolution more crucial than the print, telegraph and analogue telephone is the fact that the latter can process a large volume of information within a short period (ibid). Castells (2009: 421) indicated that “once in cyberspace, people may have all kinds of ideas, including challenging corporate power, dismantling government authority and changing the cultural foundations of our ageing civilisation.” Jenkins (2008) echoes the same view, stressing that blogs have offered people a platform to share their discontent regarding politics and ensure that everyone is allowed to be heard. This entails that the new revolution of informationalism offers interest groups unprecedented opportunities to share their thoughts and opinions and therefore challenge the status quo.

### **3.2.1 Fourth Industrial Revolution**

The Network Society Theory has recently been associated with the new industrial revolution, popularly known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The 4IR was conceived by Professor Schwab, the founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, in 2016. Schwab (2016) believes that 4IR can change how people live, work and relate to each other. Unlike the previous revolutions that were characterised by water and steam power (First Industrial Revolution), electric power (Second Industrial Revolution), and digitisation (Third Industrial Revolution), the 4IR is characterised by more advanced technologies that can blur the lines between physical, digital and biological worlds. Schwab (2016) indicated that the 4IR is disrupting almost every industry worldwide and also challenges the idea of what it means to be human. 4IR is characterised by artificial intelligence, robotics, the internet of things, automation, 3 Dimension Printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, materials science, energy storage and quantum computing. Whilst the 4IR demonstrates the potential to raise global income levels and improve the quality of life globally, the revolution faces its own challenges (ibid). Schwab (2016) argues that in terms of the economy, the 4IR is going to disrupt labour and thus heighten the level of inequalities

through the innovation of automated machines, self-driving cars, online shopping, internet banking and more importantly, the rise of robots will result in job losses. This revolution will disrupt labour markets since workers will be replaced by machines or automation.

The Network Society Theory also delves into the capabilities of social media. The current era of social media, which is the manifestation of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, has tremendously accelerated communication. Castells (1998) has long theorised about the Fourth Industrial Revolution in which the social and economic spheres of human life will be controlled by the information and communication network. He termed this revolution a 'network society'. The significant benefit that can be derived from the network society is its ability to make various communities work together irrespective of time and distance. Castells (2004) indicated that individuals can communicate anywhere and at any time with the support of the network. With the advent of new communications technologies like social media, various social movements can discuss issues of common interest online without physical meetings. Unlike fax, wired telephone or post, the internet speeds up communication, simultaneously lowering costs.

The other aspect that makes new media more empowering is the extent to which, for instance, new social media offers unhindered access.

Traditional forms of access control are no longer applicable. Anyone can upload a video to the internet, write a blog, start a chat forum, or create a gigantic email list. Access in this case is the rule, blocking internet access is an exception (Castells 2009: 204).

This demonstrates the extent to which ICT networks function as the backbone of society and this presents some opportunities for communities seeking alternative ways of communication (Castells 2004). On the other hand, Van Dijk (2012) indicated that institutions that are dependent on the network can stop functioning when there is network downtime. This study is motivated by the assumption that social movements can seize all the opportunities that are brought by the information age to communicate back to power. However, not all communities have seized these opportunities that are being presented by the information age. The digital divide or digital apartheid is also seen as a hindrance to the connection of people via internet networks.

The following section discusses several advantages a networked society offers to the voiceless. The significant benefit that can be derived from such a networked society is the sizeable extent to which various communities can work together irrespective of *time* and *distance*. Castells (2004) reiterated that individuals can communicate anywhere at any time with the support of a network. With new communications technology like social media, various communities can discuss issues of common interest online without having to physically meet in neutral places. Since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced communities, workplaces and students to conduct their affairs through communication networks.

The power of the ICT revolution also lies within its *flexibility* (Castells 2004). Van Dijk (2012) tends to differ from Castells (2004) in calling the age of ICT a 'revolution', arguing that modern technologies are more evolutionary than revolutionary. This means that new media technologies have evolved from traditional media. It is in the interest of the proposed study to trace the evolution of alternative media from the traditional setting to the online setting.

*Convergence* has also been identified as an advantage offered by technological revolution or evolution (Van Dijk 2012). Convergence means the integration of previously distinct technologies into one medium. This means that radio, television, and print media can now be accessed within the same medium such as a tablet, smartphone or smart television. Converging technologies give people an array of choices. The power of convergence can also be demonstrated by social media applications, such as *WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, *Twitter* and many others that allow people to text and make voice and video calls.

Furthermore, the other notable advantage of the network revolution is its enhancement of *interactivity* (Van Dijk 2012). Digital media technologies are interactive in the sense that communication is no longer a one-way but a two-way process. This means that both the sender and receiver are active participants in creating and consuming media content. Gone are those days when the audience were passive participants with no power to shape the content they were given.

*Twitter* and *Facebook* are good examples of interactive social media platforms that provide multiple ways of discussion between individuals who created their profiles.

What is not clear is how alternative groupings can organise themselves in a situation where everyone has the power to produce content.

### **3.2.2 The Network Theory of power**

The Network Theory of Power is a critical development of the Network Society Theory. The Network Theory of Power looks beyond the simplistic analysis of technology by bringing the critical element that looks into the power dynamics of the network society. Since the study is more concerned about the subalterns involved in power struggles to get their voices heard, the Network Theory of power suffices because it looks into the power structures embedded in these technologies. According to Castells (2011: 776), network power involves the “power of the actors and organisations included in the networks that constitute the core of global network society over those human collectives or individuals not included in these global networks.” The network power is concentrated in the hands of a few corporations who design the network in such a way that responds to their needs. A nexus of power between the multimedia conglomerates, political power and global financial power constitutes a network power. As Castells (2011) illustrated, financial institutions and political power rely on the flow of information from communication networks to consolidate their power. The global financial market controls vast global financial flows and has the final say in every social, political and economic aspect. They use their power to manipulate regulations and laws to their benefit.

Castells (2011) also demonstrates that political power, conversely, constitutes a network power because it controls the policies and regulations, exercises the law and controls the military. The government works with complex networks of global governance consisting of business and interest groups. These institutions rely on the government's decisions regarding regulations and policies. This alliance which involves powerful actors, thrives by suppressing the powerless. In this case, the exercise of power always results in a binary situation between the powerful and their subordinates. The collective action by those who are excluded by the networks of power results in counterpower. According to Castells (2011) “counterpower is exercised by those fighting to change the programs of specific networks and by the effort to disrupt the switches that reflect the dominant interest and replace them with alternative switches between networks.” Therefore, pressure groups such as social

movements are fighting for changes in the network of power. Since the social movements are involved in power struggles linked to their emancipation, this theory provides a relevant analysis of the prevailing power structures involved in the organisation of technology.

### **3.2.3 Technologies are socially constructed**

The Theory of Network Society is not without critics. It has often been criticised for its technologically deterministic view of technology and society. Technological determinism believes that “technological developments take place outside society, independently of social, economic, and political forces” (Wyatt 2008: 168). It is argued that technological changes bring about dramatic social change. In the information society age, the impacts of technology are difficult to ignore. Technological determinism suggests that new media and technology lead to changes and transformation in the fields of education, economy, globalisation, politics, information, occupations, culture and other fields that shape society. However, Chiumbu (2012) believes this view is very reductionist, as it does not consider human beings capable of shaping their destiny.

Social constructivists believe that society has a major role to play in shaping and accepting or rejecting technology. According to Kretchmer (2018), the Social Constructivist Theory argues that technology is socially constructed by humans responsible for accepting or rejecting technology based on their usage patterns. Other proponents of social constructivism, such as McLoughlin and Dawson (2003), Fuchs (2014a), Mosco (2005), and Zuboff (2019), have also reiterated that technology does not have any influence that can be of no individual explanation. In this sense, technology is socially constructed in its making. McLoughlin and Dawson (2003:25) also added that technology itself does not examine its capability, but it is human beings that give it the tasks. Likewise, Zuboff (2019: 15) also believes that “it is capitalism that assigns the price tag of subjugation and helplessness, not the technology.” Therefore, the argument that technology is inevitable does not hold water. Therefore, technologies are very much part of social, economic and political recreation.

Mosco’s (2005) analysis has also unveiled various myths that accompany each technological development. In his book titled *Digital sublime*, Mosco (2005) has

identified various myths that emerged during the information age. 'Digital sublime' refers to extreme optimism and myths that surround the new technology. In the wake of the digital age, various myths predicted the end of history, the closure of geographical distance, the end of politics, the development of participatory culture, an outbreak of information revolutions and the rise of a new economy. The myth relating to the new economy has led to the event commonly known as the Dotcom Bubble, which refers to an investment boom instigated by speculation that the latest technological developments will usher in a new economy. However, the euphoria around the new economy did not yield the desired results. As such, there was a collapse of technologically based stocks and share prices. Mosco (2005) has found the optimism accompanying the positive impact of technology on all spheres of life to be rather technologically deterministic. This demonstrates the extent of the pitfalls of technological developments.

The other pitfall of new technology is that technological development must respond to individuals' needs and expectations. Kretchmer (2018: 89) alluded to the fact that individuals and social groups can "assign differing priorities in the design and construction of technologies and associate different meanings to the same technological object." Technologies are constantly redesigned or updated to respond to social, economic and political situations humans face. Technological development takes place when society starts using and appreciating technologies. It should also be noted that new technologies have been developed by individuals who are members of society. By virtue of being a member of society, technological developers know how society behaves and reacts to the changes it is going through. For that reason, there is no way technology can be considered autonomous, unstoppable or inevitable (ibid).

Unwin (2012) also adds that technologies imitate life as they are created to fulfil specific social, economic and political objectives. The owners of new technologies are creating specific technologies that respond to specific ideologies. In this case, Unwin (2012) indicated that technologies always have unintended consequences. This entails that the consequences of technology cannot be one-size-fit-all. Social constructivism is a very important approach to this study as it has also been revealed that the technologies used today are not designed by subaltern beings. Unwin (2012) indicated that it would be difficult for people experiencing poverty to benefit from these

establishments that are explicitly created to fulfil capitalists' economic, political and social objectives. The Critical Political Economy Theory explains the phenomenon in which new technologies are designed to advance the interest of political and economic ownership in more detail.

Various studies, such as the one conducted by Castells (2012), suggest that new media technologies such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* are revolutionary. For instance, Fuchs (2014a) indicated that people have the power to mobilise each other and bring about political change. This entails that technology itself is not a revolution but a platform to mediate such an event. Social movements have been in existence even prior to the advent of social media. Gladwell (2010) has demonstrated the situation in which the 1960s civil rights movement in the US led to social changes without the assistance of social media.

In South Africa, the 1976 Soweto student uprising significantly impacted society without social media. As a result of the 1976 student uprising, the apartheid government received massive international condemnation and their plans to introduce Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools never materialised. In this case, McLoughlin and Dawson (2003) alluded to the notion that there is no boundary between technology and the social sphere, and once this notion has been accepted, the technology should no longer be viewed as technical, but it should be considered a result of social constructivism. The criticism of network society that arises from its technological deterministic nature has seen writers like Manuel Castells reconsider technological determinism from their explanation. Castells (1996: 3) has argued that "technology does not determine society, but society plays an influential role in the process of scientific and technological innovations." Castells was also criticised for using technical and computational terms whilst overlooking the theory of society (Fuchs 2014a). According to Fuchs (2014a), Castell's analysis lacks the aspect of social theories, which is a foundational theory of social science.

### **3.2.4 Capitalism embedded**

Apart from explaining the power of new media as being outside of individual explanations, the Network Society Theory is often criticised for separating technology from the economy. The concept of capitalism that is inextricably linked to power is

reproducing itself during the digital age. According to Schiller (1999: 48), “the main economic driver in network societies is still the desire to gather private capital; the market imperatives of competition and commodification still dominate, and the social and economic inequalities characteristic of market economies tend to widen rather than close”. Precisely, Schiller (1999) posits that the internet has been colonised by market systems. This view is also supported by Fuchs (2014a) who perceives the internet as a capitalist creation. His assertion is also supported by empirical research that proves that the internet has been created to advance capitalist aspirations.

The US which is considered the hub of capitalism, has seen various innovations that are driven by the capitalist ideology. The US’s dominance on the internet is not without suspicion. According to Wa Thiong’o (1993), the leadership of the US in technological developments, which was born out of the era of primitive accumulation and slave trade, strongly symbolises modern imperialism. Cultural imperialism, which is often disguised as globalisation, is often promoted by the Bretton Woods organisations such as IMF and World Bank. Unlike the earlier forms of colonialism that affirmed their authority through the use of army or settler colonialism, the United States’ neo-colonialism has managed to affirm the country’s authority by using soft power. Wa Thiong’o (1993: 50) indicated that the US manages to exercise its control through a ‘comprador bourgeoisie’, a group of indigenous middle-class individuals with a strong interest in foreign investments. Comprador bourgeoisie is also characterised by the assimilation of foreign cultures.

As a result of the establishment of neo-colonialist systems, it is easy for US companies to spread their influence throughout the world. The practice is often characterised as McDonaldisation, which metaphorically translates into how US companies are maintaining their influence and presence throughout the world. This phenomenon is literary connected to globalisation, which is driven by capitalism ideology. The outcries relating to this phenomenon are not new because classic writers such as Karl Marx, Gramsci, Horkheimer and Adorno were critical of globalisation. Fuchs (2014) indicated that Marx was concerned about how the telegraph would foster global relations and capitalism. Whereas Gramsci (1929) also complained about the impact of Americanisation and Fordism on cultures in Southern Italy, Fordism refers to the mass production of consumer goods driven by the capitalist ideals of mass consumption.



The impact of Fordism included the exploitation of the subalterns.

Horkheimer and Adorno (1982) have long observed that the system of culture industry comes from more liberal industrialised countries such as the US. Today, the new media companies have taken the Americanisation phenomenon to new heights. The biggest new media companies, which originate from the US, such as *Apple*, *Google*, *Microsoft*, *Amazon*, and *Facebook* have embraced globalisation by securing their presence throughout the world. Third-world countries have been at the receiving end of new technologies and they have no role in the shaping of these new cultural tools. The foremost critic of capitalism is the extent to which it purposively ignores issues of inequality, social justice, and exploitation at the expense of profit maximisation.

### **3.2.5 The impact of Network on cultural productions**

The network of power thrives through the ideas that justify the position of the powerful in society. Castells (2011: 779) argues that “the social power throughout history, but even more so in the network society, operates primarily by the construction of meaning in the human mind through processes of communication.” The images and cultural productions are very influential throughout the world. Apart from reproducing the images and representations that shape individuals’ realities, the media are legitimate areas to make money (Kupe 2021). Whilst the mainstream media has been criticised for being heavily commercialised, social media has propelled commercialisation to an unprecedented level. Kupe (2021) adds that the age of deregulation and neoliberalism has resulted in media oligopolies. The desire of the media to get big and make more money has led to the demise of public broadcasting and small players in the media industry (ibid). This also has implications for diversity and the plurality of ideas.

As Herman and Chomsky (2010) put it, the funding of the media is likely to determine the direction the media takes. In this case, the political space has been diminished due to the quest for delivering consumers to advertisers (Bennett 2003). The media is constantly filled with entertainment due to commercial pressures. Horkheimer and Adorno (1982: 144) have added that “pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even it is shown.” This demonstrates that entertainment distracts the masses from thinking critically about their suffering. As such, Bennett (2003: 17) argues that “political activists and minorities are farther removed from the

mass media picture.” Resultantly, the media representations and images are dominated by entertainment such as quiz shows, soapies, and celebrities at the expense of investigative journalism and other emancipating content (Kupe 2021). Therefore, commercially driven media that deliver consumers to advertisers is counter-posed to alternative media that deals with critical, radical and transformative content.

Commercialisation has reached an unprecedented level in the age of social media. Kupe (2021) indicated that large media monopolies have managed to penetrate the social media space at an alarming rate. While social media may be considered a panacea for political emancipation (Castells 2012), the owners of various digital firms are business people who have a vested interest in profit making. As illustrated by Forbes Magazine, (2021) Elon Musk (*Tesla/Twitter*), Jeff Bezos (*Amazon*) Mark Zuckerberg (*Facebook/Instagram/WhatsApp*) and Bill Gates (*Microsoft*) are amongst the top 5 richest people in the whole world. This demonstrates the extent to which social media, which is an extension of the internet, is not immune to commercialisation. Unlike any other industry, the commercialisation of the internet will have a serious impact on products that mediate our cultural experiences. Popular content, such as pornography and gaming, are the best-selling online content (Curran 2012). This has serious implications for other types of content that are considered less entertaining such as critical content. One of the questions this study attempts to address probes into the challenges that hinder social media as an alternative media.

In addition, Zuboff’s (2019) book titled *Digital Capitalism* details the extent to which the data of users is now sold in the market like any other commodity. This data is then used to predict the actions of individuals to coerce them to take certain actions, and in the worst-case scenario, it can be used for intelligence purposes. Zuboff (2019: 19) argues that “new automated protocols are designed to influence and modify human behaviour.” The fact that technological giants are now using technology to invade the privacy of individuals is considered a threat to individual sovereignty and democracy. Zuboff (2019) indicated that some of the information collected by the tech giants can be supplied to intelligence and law enforcement agencies. In 2013, for instance, Edward Snowden exposed the widespread surveillance that implicated the *National Security Agency*, *AOL*, *Apple*, *Facebook*, *Google*, *Microsoft*, *Paltalk*, *Skype* and *Yahoo!* (Fuchs 2017: 5). Snowden’s revelations cast some doubts about the ability of

social media in representing the disenfranchised citizens. As a result, alternative social media, as identified by Gehl (2015), have promised to do away with advertising and surveillance that characterise the activities of big social media players. The Public Sphere Theory, which is the sphere in which ideas are discussed without frontiers, involves the extent to which the network society enables this phenomenon.

### **3.3 The Public Sphere Theory**

This study is also motivated by the theoretical preconception of the Public Sphere Theory, which is part of critical social theories. The key author of this theory is Jurgen Habermas, who was a student at the Frankfurt School of Thought and an advanced Marxist critique of an economic system. The public sphere is defined as a domain of life in which public opinions were discussed without frontiers (Habermas 1989). As such, all the citizens were guaranteed to form part of public opinion and challenge the existing status quo. The word 'public' refers to events and phenomena that have a common good and are open to all. Since this study seeks to address the question of how social movements have adopted social media as their alternative media, it is important to correlate the concept of civil society to the notion of the public sphere. The concept of civil society, which encompasses civil society groupings, social movements, and NGOs, is integral to the public sphere. Caldwell (2017: 120) argues that civil society and the public sphere are "notable features of a democratic society." It is understood that the function of responsible civil society is to hold the State to account and speak back to the power through the media (Caldwell 2017).

Habermas (1989: xii) also indicated that "the press and broadcast media serve less as organs of public information and debate than as technologies for managing consensus and promoting consumer culture." This phenomenon can be better explained by the concept of manufacturing consent coined by Herman and Chomsky (2008). Manufacturing consent, which is linked to the propaganda model, indicates that the primary function of mass media is to mobilise public support with a special interest in dominating (Herman and Chomsky 2008). In this case, the mass media has the power to determine, select, shape, and restrict the news in order to serve the society's dominant elite groups. Although the normative role of the media is to accelerate the public sphere by facilitating public opinion, this is not always ideal. The media often finds itself amid economic and political controls that are driven by certain agendas. As

a result, the media cannot respond efficiently to its normative role of accelerating the public sphere. This goes against the definition of the public sphere, which reiterates that public opinion should be discussed without frontiers.

### **3.3.1 Bourgeoisie public sphere**

The concept of the public sphere, as conceptualised by Habermas (1989), can be linked to Marxism's concept of the bourgeoisie or Gramsci's (1929) concept of hegemony. The bourgeoisie public sphere took into consideration the extent to which the media is used as an instrument of control by the capitalist system. However, some scholars criticised Habermas's (1989) public sphere for being the preserve of the elites. Curran (2000) also criticised Habermas's public sphere, specifically the early work on the public sphere, which was fixated on the 'bourgeois public sphere'. The criticism also related to this type of contextualisation which placed privileged private citizens at the centre of the public sphere. Such criticism led to the formation of various types of public spheres, such as the counter-public sphere, the alternative public sphere and the African public sphere. This dissertation applied the contemporary view of the public sphere as it tries to establish the extent to which social media is an alternative media for social movement. The digital age promises the inclusion of a variety of voices in the public sphere.

The contemporary views of the public sphere are inclusive of those occupying the periphery of society in speaking to the centre of power (Curran 2000). Curran (2000: 145) also adds that the key proponents of the contemporary public sphere are perceived "to be public interest groups and also radical professionals who identify, draw attention to and interpret social problems and propose solutions." The involvement of these groups in the public sphere leads to critical debates that seek to address neglected issues and therefore uplift the underprivileged groups. However, the success of these mobilisations depends on the media which is mostly the instrument used by the capitalist system and/or the government.

In a liberal capitalist societies, the working and lower class are generally positioned and viewed as unable to articulate a meaningful discourse over the problem that they are faced with, are viewed as uneducated, uninformed, potentially dangerous and to be lacking legitimacy in participating in common affairs (Mylonas 2022).

Resultantly, bourgeois media articulates the proletariat experience in ways that reproduce bourgeois values, norms, and interests.

Conventional media cannot offer unrestricted access to all members due to space and time. Herman and Chomsky's (2008) model of propaganda, along with the traditional theories of news, has proved effective in explaining the extent to which the news cannot flow unhindered. As Herman and Chomsky (2008:2) put it:

... the elite domination of the media and marginalisation of dissents that results from the operation of these filters occurs so naturally that the news media people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news 'objectively' and on the basis of the professional news values.

One of the theories of news is gate-keeping - a process in which journalists and editors are responsible for selecting and shaping news stories before publishing or broadcasting them (De Beer and Botha 2008). Gate-keepers also take instructions from the media's economic or political ownership to advance their agendas. Some news entities, such as the *SABC*, have often been accused of being biased toward the ruling party. Ngwenya (2015) also investigated the independence of the *SABC* and found that the public service broadcaster is inextricably linked to the State and the global power matrix. Nevertheless, the new media promises to remove the professional organisation of news which involves gate-keeping and framing because anyone can post their stories and ideas on social media.

Other than gate-keeping, journalists and editors are solely responsible for framing and setting agendas. According to De Beer and Botha (2008), framing refers to sorting out and organising topics relating to an event for the readers or viewers of that news to effectively interpret that event, whereas agenda setting is the extent to which the media tells us what to think about or how to think about a specific topic or event. All these factors may restrict the flow of information. Restricting the flow of information may also arise as a result of external forces such as the regulatory environment, norms, pressure groups, sources, and consumers.

On the other side, the economic-owned news media are accused of representing the

position of their shareholders or advertisers. Herman and Chomsky (2008) are critical of the advertisement-driven media, which tries all the means at its disposal to appeal to advertisers. Resultantly, objectivity in news reporting is not guaranteed. These statements demonstrate the extent to which the traditional news outlets have conformed to the bourgeoisie public sphere, which is reserved for the elites. Therefore, Mylonas (2022) have identified the Proletariat Public Sphere to enable the working and lower classes to articulate their realities and experiences. Other alternative spheres such as African Public Sphere and Counter-Public Sphere are also meant to address the deficit of bourgeois media in mediating the proletariat's affairs. The next section discusses the digital public sphere which is an attempt to locate alternative media in the digital age.

### **3.3.2 The Digital Public sphere**

The arrival of new media has changed the way the media operates. According to Schwab (2016), "new technologies and platforms will increasingly enable citizens to engage with governments, voice their opinions, coordinate their efforts, and even circumvent the supervision of public authorities." The new social media, which is characterised by interactivity and convergence, offers unprecedented platforms to produce and consume news. The flow of news is no longer mono-directional or bi-directional but multi-directional. Theoretically, social media ought to allow everyone to participate in the public sphere, but there are constraints. Mosco (2008) does not see the new media deviating from the earlier forms of media. Mosco (2008:54) believes that whatever form the new media takes, "old issues endure in the world of that new media." Although this may be true, the power of new media should not be underestimated. Daniels (2016) has given digital media the benefit of the doubt by indicating that social media contributes to the strengthening of the public sphere. In this case, hashtag activism is challenging Habermas's (1989) idea of the elite public sphere.

The belief that social media contributes to the greater public sphere is still a subject of scholarly debate that resembles the *chicken-and-egg* enigma. Whilst some scholars believe that digital media contributes to the public sphere, others contend that social media will create the real digital divide as people are deprived of important information due to unlimited choices (see Gandy 2002). Whilst some social media users may take

advantage of unlimited choices to understand the world around them, the need for others to fulfil their desire for entertainment may accelerate the digital divide. The phenomenon of the digital divide has been dealt with in more detail in Section 4.4. Fuchs (2014a) also believes that corporate social media is dominated by big corporations and political actors who set the agenda around the ideas that are circulating on social media. For instance, Fuchs (2014a) notes that the most popular accounts on *YouTube*, *Facebook* or *Twitter* emanate from powerful global individuals or corporations who tend to prioritise entertainment or non-political topics. Large corporate media content on *YouTube* is very popular because these corporations have financial resources at their disposal to promote their content (ibid). Consequently, the visibility of most political blogs in the public sphere is minimal.

On the contrary, Schwab (2016) is concerned about the extent to which digital tools will weaken the most important aspects of human capacity such as compassion, intimacy and cooperation. In addition, the assimilation of the digital and physical world which is exacerbated by the 4IR “may deprive us of one of life most important assets: the time to pause, reflect and engage in meaningful conversation” (Schwab 2016). This phenomenon demonstrates the extent to which the public sphere in the digital age is a subject of ongoing debate. Whilst the extent to which the internet or new media accelerates the public sphere is still ambiguous, the researcher found this theory relevant in explaining how various members of society are involved in the public sphere. The changes that are brought by the new media have prompted the researcher to rethink the definition of alternative media in the context of the digital age.

In advancing the Public Sphere Theory, Jenkins (2008) believes that social media will accelerate the public sphere in the digital age because the internet has become a democratic space that enables participatory engagement amongst its users. The view that social media advances the public sphere is considered technological determinist. Critical social scholars like Fuchs (2014a), Curran (2012) and Schiller (1999) have contested the idea that social media are participatory, cause revolutions or advance the public sphere. Their analysis reveals that capitalism is an important beneficiary in the advancement of new communication technologies and the internet. The next section on the critical political economy of social media will review the capitalist system

of accumulation in the era of digital media. The theory of critical political economy also challenges the notion of technological determinism.

### **3.4 Critical political economy of social media**

The Critical Political Economy Theory is another critical theory whose conceptualisation can be linked to the bourgeoisie public sphere. The Critical Political Economy Theory will be used in this study to foster understanding of the power configurations that are involved in social media which is regarded as the platform of many paradoxes. According to Fuchs (2017: 19), “the critical political economy is concerned about how resources are produced, distributed, consumed, and which power relations shape these resources.” In the digital age, this theory also unpacks the power relations that are involved in social media. Although social media is said to allow everyone the opportunity to share and impart information, other writers have demonstrated that the most powerful individuals on social media have more attention (Fenton 2017; Fuchs 2017). This portrays the extent to which digital media are continuing to prioritise issues of the elites.

Mano and Mukhongo (2016) indicate that alternative media in Africa should be viewed through the lens of the Critical Political Economy Theory as it is fighting against the effects of global capitalism. In this sense, Fuchs (2010) defined alternative media as critical media that ought to be counter-hegemonic and capable of creating oppositional messages that are designed to challenge the dominant ideologies that seem to justify capitalist forces. The Critical Political Economy Theory is also applicable in the study of alternative media since this type of media fights against the dominant forces of capitalism. It is also important to note that many social movements are created to respond to the social problems that are caused by capitalism, such as unemployment, poverty, inequality, and landlessness.

The Critical Political Economy Theory is not new. Seminal authors such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1845) synthesised about political economy. However, the popularity of the theory was accelerated by students at the Frankfurt School of Thought, such as Horkheimer and Adorno (1982), who were concerned about the deception of the mass culture industry. Karl Marx's influential writings gave birth to the new school of thought known as ‘Marxism’ or the ‘Marxist’ ideology. Essential to the Marxist approach was the critique of capitalist systems in an attempt to create a



classless society. Although his ideas were conceptualised more than a century ago, his writings are still influential today because the capitalist tendency to accumulate wealth and subjugate the working class is still a reality. Fuchs (2017) indicated that Marx's comments on the telegraph and how it fostered the globalisation of trade could be applied in the current situation where the internet is dominating all spheres of human life. The applicability of the Marxist conceptualisations in the field of Media and Cultural Studies is well encapsulated in this quote:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas (Marx and Engels 1845: 39).

This demonstrates that the bourgeoisie (ruling class) always uses its material power to control the proletariat (working class). Therefore, the mass media, which is controlled by the ruling elites, always legitimises the ideas of the ruling class. According to McQuail (2005), Marx is one of the most influential 19<sup>th</sup> Century social thinkers who saw the media as the capitalists' instrument of control. In his writings, Karl Marx was interested in the interactions between "economic ownership and the dissemination of messages that affirm the legitimacy and the value of the class society" (McQuail 2005: 95). In modern times, Karl Marx's major area of concern in media would be the upper class' tendencies to control all forms of media (see Bagdikian 2007; Herman and Chomsky 2008). According to Bagdikian (2007: 4), "the size and multiple holdings of dominant firms had given existing conglomerates formidable lobbying power on governments that served industrial power and profit over public needs." It is therefore very crucial to use the Marxist critique of political economy to explain the extent to which mainstream media is dominating all forms of public spheres in society. Presumably, Marxist thinking favoured the alternative or radical media that is designed to include the voices of the proletariat. Just like Marxists, alternative media are fighting for a classless, anti-capitalist society.

The Marxist view of mass media was one of class domination in which opinions and

views were influenced by the ruling class who, in turn, used the media to justify their wealth and privilege in society (Thompson 2019). Therefore, media owners are responsible for distributing content that keeps the passive audience from criticising the status quo that is characterised by capitalism. Thompson (2019) adds that the content emanating from bourgeoisie media is biased since it reflects the opinions of the ruling class. In Marxist terms, the ruling class therefore disseminates messages to society without allowing opposition or alternative views. However, every theory has its own shortcomings. The Marxist thinking has been criticised by the pluralist view which maintains that the audience has an agency in processing what they consume from the media and the journalists also have the freedom to write their own stories without interference from media owners (Thompson 2019). The pluralist view also believes that corporations are driven by profit, which entails that their key focus will be to satisfy the needs of their audience and keep their advertisers. This pluralist view also finds the arrival of new media as a watershed moment for social movement because such media exercises greater control over audiences to produce content, thus limiting the reign of mediated media.

### **3.4.1 Capital accumulation in the digital age**

Whilst the pluralist view may regard social media as a new platform that is there to emancipate people, there is a lot of attestation that makes it difficult to divorce social media from capitalism or neoliberalism (Fuchs 2014a; Curran 2012; Schiller 1999; Couldry 2010; Mosco 2008). Max Weber has long theorised that “the fact that what is called the technological development of modern times has been so largely orientated economically to profit-making is one of the fundamental facts of the history of technology” (Weber quoted in Zuboff 2019: 15). Max Weber’s earlier works also influenced contemporary critical thinkers such as Fuchs, Zuboff, and Mosco who see the digital age as an instrument of capitalism in the quest to extract commodified value. The works of earlier theorists and contemporary scholars are very important in dissecting the paradox in which social media has to affirm the position of power whilst also distributing alternative content.

In addition, Fuchs (2014a) theorised that social media is a capitalist instrument that is designed to maximise revenue. The emergence of new media has also led to a new phenomenon of digital capitalism, which is fuelling the expansion of the internet. Digital

media are increasingly commercialised and it has become the site for businesses. According to Mosco (2008:54), “new media deepen and extend tendencies of earlier forms of capitalism by opening new possibilities to turn media and audience into saleable commodities.” This depicts the internet as inherently capitalist in nature. In whatever form the new technology emerges, there is always a manifestation of the early forms of capitalism (Mosco 2008). The earlier form of capitalism, or what was commonly known as the industrial age, is theorised by classical thinkers such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Friedrich Engels and Emile Durkheim. Zuboff (2019) argues that surveillance capitalism is threatening human nature, contrary to the industrial age, which is threatening the environment.

Although social media has been lauded as creating revolutions (Castells 2012), other scholars like Fuchs (2014a) see social media as a site of capitalistic interactions. Social media networks like *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Twitter* and *Instagram* are businesses that generate revenue for their shareholders. Fuchs (2014a: 105) indicated that “social media platforms accumulate capital with the help of targeted advertising that is tailored to individual user data and behaviour.” Social media platforms often venture into selling their users’ private information, which includes their location, contact details, likes and interests of users to advertisers (Fuchs 2014a; Gehl 2015). Thus, social media users are seen as products that can be sold in the market like other commodities. In all likelihood, Fuchs (2017) has linked this phenomenon to the idea of exploitation. The era of social media has entrenched the concept of exploitation. Apart from selling the data of users to advertisers, tech companies are involved in various forms of exploitation such as child labour. For instance, tech companies are fuelling issues of child labour in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as there is a scramble for lithium. DRC is rich in Lithium, which is the resource used to create batteries that power smartphones, electric cars and other gadgets. According to Kelly (2019), *Apple*, *Google*, *Dell*, *Microsoft* and *Tesla* have been named in a lawsuit brought by the family members of children who died or were injured while mining lithium in DRC.

Gehl (2015: 5) argues that the “networking imagined by corporate social media is less networking between peers and more networking between consumers and brands.” This portrays the extent to which commercially dominated social media have enabled

businesses to capture the spaces. This phenomenon has a negative consequence on free speech, which has been a selling point for social media. This has led Gehl (2015) to propose a framework for alternative social media, which seeks to reject all forms of advertisements. Alternative social media are said to challenge the hegemonic position facilitated by corporate social media. However, Fuchs (2017) indicated that there could be no alternative to *Facebook* because it represents a unique social media and has specific monopolistic characteristics that it represents. This means that it will be very difficult for people to leave *Facebook* for these alternative platforms that do not offer the same amount of connections.

Equally, Zuboff (2019) has also likened this phenomenon to surveillance capitalism, which makes it possible to know almost everything about people. Surveillance capitalism will cost us our human nature and threaten privacy (ibid). Schwab (2016), who also concurs with Zuboff (2019), has identified the issue of privacy as the greatest challenge posed by the information age. The era of 4IR and the introduction of 5G networks will likely exacerbate the surveillance regimes. 5G networks with exponential bandwidth transfer will make it easy for governments to place surveillance cameras equipped with facial detection in order to follow people's movements. This challenge of privacy has angered privacy advocacy groups.

The sale of personal information by social media giants enables various corporates to dominate the internet space. Gehl (2015) has demonstrated that the social media model was celebrated by alternative media scholars who saw its potential in terms of challenging the hegemony. However, social media has since been appropriated by capitalist forces. Fuchs's (2014a) analysis of social media demonstrates the extent to which the corporates have colonised social media. His empirical research found that politics is dominated by entertainment and music. The most popular profiles on *Facebook*, *Twitter* or *YouTube* are about entertainment and music. Politics does not feature prominently in the top 10 social media profiles or pages. With this in mind, Fuchs (2014a: 102) concludes that "social media do not constitute a public sphere or participatory democratic space, but are rather colonised by corporations, especially the multimedia companies that dominate the attention and visibility." This view is also supported by Gandy (2002) who sees the distinction between citizens and consumers (see digital divide in Section 3.4). This entails that many people who are on social

media are on the platform as consumers rather than practising their citizenship or participatory culture.

### **3.4.2 Conspicuous consumption**

Capitalism has accelerated the practice of conspicuous consumption in the digital space. According to Patsiaouras and Fitchett (2012), conspicuous consumption is the extent of excessive and competitive spending practices that are associated with a certain social class. Social media has become a space where people display their extravagant and luxurious lifestyles. For that reason, many brands have made significant strides on social media and consequently fuelling consumerism. This practice is in contrast with some scholars who view social media as a democratic space where citizens can exercise their political power. Castells (2012) believes that the internet can bring about economic and political revolution, accelerate consumer participation, and emancipate people. However, the contemporary view, which sees the internet as a space of capital, has since disputed all the claims about the emancipatory nature of the internet. As a result, Fuchs (2014a: 102) indicated that “the internet and social media are today stratified, non-participatory spaces and an alternative, non-corporate internet is needed.” This further challenges the view that social media is an alternative voice for the subalterns. This dichotomy has prompted the researcher to conduct this study and delve into the issue of alternative media in the digital age.

### **3.4.3 New media as a disruptor**

An emerging counterview sees technology as a disruptor of capitalism rather than as an enabler of capitalism. Mosco (2008: 55) notes that “the growth of communication and information technology does not just serve capitalism; it significantly disrupts it”. It seems the abundance of information on the internet or social media makes it difficult for the capitalist system to preserve its monopolies. Many media companies that specialise in the production and circulation of text have experienced some form of a decline in revenues. This includes a decline in the sale of newspapers, books, and music sales. However, the old monopolies have been replaced by new ones that rally around the ticket of media freedoms. Consumers are not willing to pay for content they can get elsewhere for free. The online environment makes it easier for people to share content that is derived from the electronic format. The boom of pirate industries

– a parallel platform to upload and download content illegally, is also disrupting traditional business models. There is a proliferation of illegal websites specialising in sharing music, films, e-books, live sports and software. These platforms' popularity is also fuelled by various open-source platforms, such as bit-torrent and free music websites that allow people with a common interest to form groups and share the links to the sites of the latest pirated music, films, e-books, and software.

Mosco (2008) also notes that the availability of open-source software makes it difficult for corporations to control people. These open-source software packages have made it possible for consumers to become producers of the text. Traditional news sources are struggling to attract large audiences due to an increase in the number of open-source software. Most news stories break on social media before traditional newspaper journalists report on them. Consequently, journalists ought to maintain their presence on social media to keep tabs on topical issues around the world. Social media platforms like *Twitter* also contain a list of trending topics all the time. *Twitter* uses its algorithm to determine trending stories in a specific city, region or country. In essence, this puts the citizens in a better position to determine the agenda of the news.

Some journalists often use tweets from members of the public as news sources (Daniels 2016). Traditional sources such as spokespersons of government, businesses or NGOs also maintain their presence on social media to answer any questions related to their portfolios. What this means is that the availability of open-source software has rendered the traditional theories of news absolute. It is no longer journalists and editors who are responsible for facilitating public discourse, but the citizens are also involved in determining the agenda of the public discourse. This demonstrates the extent to which ordinary members of society, such as civil society groupings, can use social media to communicate their neglected topics to the general populace. The extent to which social movements can mobilise on social media without frontiers is an important development in the public sphere. However, it should also be noted that powerful corporations can use the same technology to block dissenting views in order to maintain the status quo. As Mosco (2008) indicated, old forms of capitalism are replaced by new forms of capitalism such as technological driven capitalism.

#### 3.4.4 State control in the digital age

The Critical Political Economy Theory does not only concern itself with the role of private capital but also the role that government can play in this process. In hindsight, the theory focuses on the interplay between political and economic influence in the media. This section focuses on the role that the State can play in the ownership and control of digital media. There is a gap in literature relating to the aspects of State control of the new media because of the belief that new digital tools are inevitable or unstoppable. Evidently, the digital era has diminished the role of government in regulating the media. Schwab (2016) indicated that new technology is proving that it is difficult for the government to adapt to rapid changes brought about by the 4IR. In this case, governments are unable to balance the public interest and universal access. Quintessentially, repressive governments may also find it difficult to control the circulation of knowledge in the public domain because the State broadcaster is no longer the sole producer of knowledge. Scholars and social analysts (Castells 2012; O'Sullivan 2009; Smith 2011) believe that social media are causing revolutions.

Nevertheless, Schwab (2016) indicated that “government will gain new technologies to increase their control over populations based on pervasive surveillance systems and the ability to control digital infrastructure.” Unwin (2012) and Zuboff (2019) also concur with Schwab on the notion that technology can be used by those in power to gain knowledge and power over less powerful individuals. The desire of the State to control all forms of communication is already a cause for concern. Technology is seen as a tool used by the government to maintain the status quo of dominance. The concern that social media poses a threat to democracy has resulted in many governments developing ways of reducing its impact. During the Arab Springs protest, for instance, the Egyptian government shut down the internet, blocked access to telecommunication networks and banned social media like *Twitter* and *Facebook* (Wilson and Dunn 2011; Bardici 2012; Aouragh 2012). In some instances, the undisputed ability of social media to change the political order has resulted in various governments requesting confidential information of users on various social media platforms. China, for instance, has blocked *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Google* for refusing to bow down to their request to monitor users (Chandel, Jingji, Yunnan, Jingyao and Zhipeng 2019). At some stage, the US also proposed to ban *Tik-Tok* (Williams 2020).

This demonstrates the extent to which political powers are fighting over the control of new digital media to continue controlling the populace. Therefore, one of the objectives of this study is to investigate how the power configurations that are involved in social media are affecting its alternative role.

### **3.4.5 Alternative media as critical media**

The idea of alternative media as critical media, which has been theorised by critical scholars like Fuchs (2010), is seen as a solution to the conundrum of political economy. Fuchs (2010) argues that alternative media should also be critical of the dominant structure of society. This stance that alternative media should be critical is also favoured by the Marxist tradition in advancing the voices of the working class. Therefore, critical media questions the status quo, challenges power and gives voice to the oppressed, the dominated or excluded. On the other side, Downing (Cited in Atton 2002a) also theorised alternative media as radical media. Just like the critical media, the radical media aims to give voice to the voiceless in an environment that is characterised by dominant capitalistic structures (Downing cited in Atton 2002a). In the context of the new digital age, Radical Media Theory is also anchored by the Social Construction Theory.

Theorising the broad concept of alternative media always has its setbacks. For example, Jeppesen (2016) also acknowledges the existence of a wide variety of contradictions in theorising alternative media. Various scholars have since identified their niche areas of sub-divisions. In essence, the theoretical foundations of radical media as conceptualised by Downing (cited in Atton 2002a) have been widely used in studies involving social movements. Radical media, as conceptualised by Downing, is the type of media that is designed to effect social change; such media includes many voices, must not be aligned to political parties, and also supports the struggles of social movements with significant impact (Atton 2002a). The radical and critical media are required to challenge the status quo, which is dominated by neoliberalism discourses. According to Couldry (2010), neoliberalism has resulted in a crisis of voice and agency. Some voices that endorse alternative views are constantly denied by the dominant ideals of neoliberalism. The Critical Political Economy Theory is useful in delineating the radical or critical element of alternative media.



### 3.5 Post-colonial Subaltern Theory

In locating the study, it is arguably befitting to consider the Post-Colonial Subaltern Theory. The study focuses on research subjects that have been previously excluded. Since the main objective of this study revolves around determining how social movements that are disenfranchised in nature have found their voice on social media, the study has applied the Post-Colonial Subaltern Theory. The term 'subaltern' was first coined by Gramsci (1929) who was referring to people who are ranked lower in social, political, and other hierarchies of life in Southern Italy. Gramsci's (1929) concept of 'subaltern' emanates from the idea of hegemony. Linked to the Marxist concept of the proletariat, the subalterns in Gramsci's conceptualisation are compelled to consent to hegemonic ideology as orchestrated by the ruling class. The overlapping thought processes of Marx and Gramsci reflect the confluence of the critical social theory. Recently, the term 'subaltern' has been adopted by post-colonial theorists such as Spivak who wrote a well-enchanted essay titled: "Can the subaltern speak". Spivak (2010) brought the issue of the subaltern to the fore of postcolonial studies as she expressed the marginalisation, dispossession and oppression of brown women in India. The term 'subaltern' denotes the notion that people are marginalised based on the intersectionality of race, gender, class and ethnicity.

With the blend of feminist and postcolonial approaches, Spivak (2010) demonstrates the plea of women who are deprived of their voice and agency. The subaltern group relies on the elites who are the same people who reproduce exploitation. The term subaltern is synonymous with the excluded, marginalised, and disempowered based on race, gender and ethnicity (Kent 2008; Moyo 2014). Such people are generally excluded, and they do not have a voice and agency. Spivak (2010) indicated that to be heard, the subaltern must adopt the language, thoughts and reasoning of the dominant rather than their reasoning and forms of knowledge. In dissecting the issues of the voiceless, Couldry (2010) has written in his book titled *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism* which argues that access to social media does not necessarily equate to voice or agency. Couldry (2010) indicated that the long-entrenched inequalities and subjugation constitute the basis on which the voice is denied or rendered illusionary. Neoliberalism, which is the dominant economic system, currently creates an era in which the unequal distribution of income, wealth and

resources has become pervasive. Whilst neoliberalism is characterised by increased competition which drives innovation, this market system is responsible for developing various social and economic inequalities. In this era, the subalterns are systematically denied the agency and voice to speak against issues that affect their everyday realities.

Moyo and Mutsvairo (2018) have also written about the subaltern experience within the African context. Their chapter titled: *Can the subaltern think*, looks into the epistemic freedom of Africans to express their own ideas. Moyo and Mutsvairo (2018) believe that both the theory and methodologies, as prescribed by Western scholarship, must be decolonised. Africans are seen as mere research subjects of the theories and methodologies that were tested elsewhere. As Garman (2015: 17) advised, “never forget that most of the theory [and methodology] did not come out of Africa, that much of it has ambiguous histories of alliances with colonial power.” It is very difficult to overcome the shackles of colonialism when European epistemologies are still dominant in Africa.

### **3.5.1 The digital subaltern**

Since the introduction of new communication technologies, the concept of subaltern has since been adapted to the digital age. According to Kent (2008), digital subaltern refers to people who are truly unconnected to the internet and they represent what he calls the digital divide 2.0. Such people are truly unconnected because they have no direct or indirect contact with the internet. Kent (2008) further indicated that the digital subalterns do not have a voice on the internet and always rely on the elite to relay their voices. However, they cannot speak for themselves because they are excluded from the digital world. This entails that their visibility and invisibility are always determined by the elites who have digital capital, thus:

With no shared space with those online, the digital subaltern has no ability to perceive what they are excluded from. Their inability to access the Internet obscures their view of that from which they are excluded, and at the same time inhibits society’s awareness of their exclusion. This results in an environment for the digital underclass where they are denied a voice (Kent 2008: 92).

Consequently, their experiences cannot be relayed by anyone because they remain excluded. Kent (2008) adds that there is a lack of class consciousness among the

subaltern group. The digital subaltern will be useful in this study, which involves the extent to which the social movement representing various subaltern groupings uses social media to voice their concerns.

### **3.5.2 The digital subaltern in Africa**

Although Post-Colonial Subaltern Theory has been widely used to refer to people of low rank in India, the concept is also highly applicable in the African context. Africa has gone through a long history of colonialism in which Africans were colonised, enslaved and stripped of their dignity. The African decolonial writers, such as Fanon, Biko, Paulo Freire, Aime Césaire, Lewis Gordon, Angela Davids, Ngungi wa Thiong'o, Magobe Ramose, Sandile Gatsheni Ndlovu and Nelson Maldonado Torres, wrote extensively about the experiences of the enslaved, the colonised, the oppressed or the dominated. Fanon's (1961) famous book: *The wretched of the earth* described the subaltern as the lumpenproletariat. The lumpenproletariat includes the peasantry, vagrants, and the unemployed. Such people are deprived of a voice and are excluded from discourses that have a bearing on their lives. Biko's (1978) idea of Black consciousness also emanated from the subalternity of the African population who were oppressed under apartheid rule. The oppressed groups continue to be excluded based on location, language, class, gender, and any other social strata.

Ramose (2003) also demonstrated the extent to which non-Africans have dominated African discourses. The reason behind this is colonisation, which reduced Africans to non-beings who are incapable of speaking for themselves. The danger of this scenario is the likelihood of getting the African stories twisted. This is in line with the African proverb: "Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter", which illustrates that many African stories were reported from the angle of the colonialists (the hunter). The colonialists, in this case, always write stories portraying them as messiahs because the Africans (the lions) could not express their own viewpoints. In order to break away from this unfavourable experience, Ramose (2003:1) suggests that "Africans should take the opportunity to speak for and about themselves and in that way construct an authentic and truly African discourse about Africa." In this regard, this study is inspired by the decolonial and post-colonial paradigms that seek to promote African discourses. The development of new technologies has emboldened the need for the adoption of Post-Colonial Subaltern

Theory to analyse this phenomenon.

The arrival of the internet and the Fourth Industrial Revolution has raised the suspicion of analysts and scholars because of the belief that new technologies are created in such a way that perpetuates inequality and exclusion. According to Nakamura and Chow-White (2012:2), “the digital is altering our understandings of what race is as well as nurturing new types of inequality along racial lines.” This has called for African scholars to seriously consider issues of race that are perpetuated by the internet and to propose sustainable solutions.

Various scholars have observed that the internet mimics Western cultures (Castells 2004; Dalvit 2018; Moyo 2018). The decolonial view of the digital divide, as conceptualised by Moyo (2018), seems to provide a progressive encounter of the digital divide that is excluded from the domain of European scholarship. The decolonial view argues that the digital divide does not stop when people are connected to the internet. Access to the internet also perpetuates a special type of divide. Moyo (2018: 135) indicated that the “internet presents a virtual form of coloniality that is part of a broader matrix of power of Western modernity.” This means that access to the internet is not a solution to problems posed by the digital divide. The internet is seen as a tool of cultural imperialism that reproduces the current divides between the global north and south.

In addition, Dalvit (2018: 76) also indicated that “ICTs are shaped by the cultural conventions of the West.” Non-Western cultures and languages are virtually absent from the internet. As Castells (1998) indicated, the culture of the internet is the culture of the Western people who created it. Dalvit (2018) adds that the language used in the new media is almost entirely English (Dalvit 2018). Non-English speakers always find themselves at the margin of the new media. The absence of African languages and cultures is a sign that the internet, in its current form, is not truly emancipatory (Moyo 2018). In this case, social media is also seen as a Western creation meant to advance neo-colonialism. This view is also supported by Fuchs (2014a), Curran (2012), Mosco (2008), Zuboff (2019) and Schiller (1999) who view social media (internet) as an instrument of capitalism designed to further colonise the subaltern beings and turn them into tradable commodities. This demonstrates the interlinked history of colonialism and capitalism. Whilst social media prides itself in allowing multiple voices

and the convergence of realities, the digital divide, in all its forms, may hinder social media as an alternative media designed to empower subaltern beings.

One of Africa's seminal language authors, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (1993), emphasised the importance of language in decolonising the minds of the oppressed. Wa Thiong'o (1993:31) argues that "the oppressor nation uses the language as a means of entrenching itself in the oppressed nation." In addition, Fanon (1961) also touches on the issue of the coloniser's language, which affirms the imperialist identity. The internet has created a new phenomenon of a global village that has the power to transcend borders. As such, the internet has become a new tool of cultural imperialism being used to affirm the position of English as a global language. This development has led to the suppression of local languages and cultures. Wa Thiong'o (1993) adds that indigenous languages are suppressed in an attempt to systematically disorient the natives from their history and culture which are carried by their languages. This demonstrates a deep-rooted crisis of dependence because people are coerced to assimilate to the culture of the creators of the internet in order to reap full benefits.

### **3.5.3 The great digital divide**

Within the digital age, the digital subaltern is linked to the digital divide concept, which many contemporary critical observers have unanimously identified as a problem (Kupe 2021; Dalvit 2018; Moyo 2018). Various attempts have been made at this stage to theorise the digital divide (Ragnedda and Muschert 2018; Van Dijk 2018). Although the subject of the digital divide has been studied for over 20 years, the digital divide theory is still in its embryonic stage (Van Dijk 2018). This section unpacks the concept of the digital divide and the various attempts scholars have made to theorise it. Van Dijk (2012: 196) defines the "digital divide as the gap between those who do and do not have access to computers and the internet".

The digital divide manifests in many forms and in all spheres of society. For instance, the lines between the first world and third world countries, the urban-to-rural divide, rich-to-poor divide, White-to-Black divide, educated-to-uneducated divide, gendered divide, as well as the divide between the disabled and other intersectionalities are always the most crucial manifestations of the digital divide. The digital divide is not a new type of divide, but it always takes into cognisance the current

societal divides that are apparent in the capitalistic society. The power of new media to transcend borders also means that inequality is replicated throughout the whole world. In this case, the internet has become a new form of imperialism. As the research is conducted within the context of a 'third world' country, South Africa in this case, which is characterised by deepening inequality, the theoretical underpinnings of the Post-Colonial Subaltern Theory will be very useful in contextualising some of the challenges that persist in the context of the informational age.

In fostering an understanding of the multifaceted concept of the digital divide, various scholars have noted three or four different levels of the digital divide (Ragnedda and Muschert 2018; Van Dijk 2018). The three levels of the digital divide include material or physical access; skills, motivation, and usage; and the benefits that can be accrued from using digital technologies. The first level (materials or physical access) is a type of digital divide that is caused by a lack of access to the internet or a device that facilitates access to the internet. Many contemporary scholars hailing from the global north have since dismissed the existence of this type of digital divide because internet penetration has reached universal access in their context. In the context of developing nations, the digital divide arises due to a lack of materials or physical access, as many people below the poverty line cannot afford to buy smartphones, tablets and laptops. Worse still, there are some members of society who can afford to buy the necessary devices but may not be able to afford uninterrupted internet access. These are some of the realities that many South Africans are grappling with. These realities are exacerbated by lack of employment, low wages, rising inflation and the disastrous consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there has been significant progress in terms of the availability of ICT devices at a low price. Statistics SA (2020) indicated that the majority of the population had devices that could connect to the internet. The remaining challenge in the South African context is the lack of physical access. The high cost of the internet prohibits many people from accessing crucial information on various websites and apps. Furthermore, Kretchmer (2018: 93) indicated that "individuals with disabilities may never overcome the divide and may even find increasing inequality in the future." This entails that people living with disabilities may not derive the full benefits offered by the new media because the types of technologies being used are not disability-friendly.

Contrary to the popular belief that access to ICT devices has reached the saturation stage in developed countries, Kretchmer (2018) gives his own account of the digital divide in the US. He argues that “it will take two decades for those households with incomes under \$15000 - \$19999, almost 67 years for rural residents and more than 294 years for those with less than a high school education to attain levels of internet use equivalent to more privilege groups” (Kretchmer 2018: 91). This dismisses the myth that material and physical level only affects developing countries.

Recent developments in the studies of digital divides have pointed to the second and third levels of the digital divide (Van Dijk 2012; Ragnedda 2017). The second level of the digital divide deals with skills, motivation, and usage. The digital divide, as conceptualised by Van Dijk (2012), can also exist amongst communities due to a lack of motivation to use these technologies. The older generation may fear using this new media technology due to technophobia (fear of new technologies). Some people fear using new technology due to the fear of losing their privacy, identities, as well as the fear of cyber-bullying. Furthermore, the digital divide, as conceptualised by Van Dijk (2012), can also be created by a lack of the different skills required to use new media tools. According to Kamp (2016: 6), “most users appear to be rather passive consumers who do not move beyond the liking and sharing of social media content.” Passive users require certain levels of skills for them to contribute meaningfully on social media. The levels of skills may be a motivating factor for one to optimally use new media but those without skills may be demotivated. This also leads to another point, which focuses on the lack of motivation to use technology as another cause of the digital divide. Fuchs (2014a) also indicated that not all voices have the same power in the digital world because the online world privileges the voices of politicians and popular celebrities. In this case, the less-known individuals or groups may feel too demotivated to use social media because their voices would not matter. Although the era of social media has heralded the inclusion of various voices, the emerging view from Couldry (2010) indicates that the neoliberal principle has rendered some voices valueless. It is highly unlikely that those individuals whose voices have been curtailed or limited would continue using such platforms meaningfully. According to Couldry (2010: 2), “the voice enables us to build an alternative view of politics that is at least partly oriented to valuing process of voice.” The most powerful members of society

have a bigger voice which they use to coerce the less powerful members of society to conform to the neoliberal status quo. The unequal treatment of the voices of the less powerful further exacerbates the digital divide.

It is important to note that the level of skills always determines usage patterns. The digital divide always exists as there are people who use new media less than others (Van Dijk 2012). Various factors such as lack of time; age or privacy influence the inability to optimally use the new media. A study conducted by Daniels (2014) indicated that some journalists in most Johannesburg-based newsrooms are not using *Twitter* optimally because of their busy schedules. Other than journalists, other media professionals with busy schedules can relate to this finding. Journalists and many other media professionals can afford to have physical access and the skills to use technologies but, they are not deriving the full benefits due to time constraints.

As illustrated in the previous section, non-Western scholars have raised concerns regarding the culture and language of the internet (Moyo 2018; Wa Thiong'o 1993; Dalvit 2018). As Castells (1998) elaborated, the culture of the internet is the culture of the people who created it. In this case, the internet culture replicates the Western culture, which does not embrace diversity and pluralism.

Ragnedda (2017) added that there is a third layer that entrenches the digital divide. The third level is concerned with the benefits that can be accrued from using digital technologies. He argues that the digital divide breeds new forms of inequality, as others may use the knowledge and skills gained online to improve their lives while others do not. The internet has a vast amount of knowledge that one may use to improve their social, cultural and economic well-being. Many people who were previously ignored by the conventional media may also use social media or other online platforms to promote themselves. Gandy (2002) viewed this phenomenon as the 'real digital divide.' He argues that the new media environment will widen the gap between citizens and consumers. The citizen, in this case, refers to those who are using the new media to participate in the public sphere, whereas the consumers refer to those who consume the content to satisfy the desires of advertisers and sponsors. The new media is deeply rooted within the capitalist mode of production in order to deliver the audience to the advertisers in the form of entertainment, play, and communication. The proliferation of new media devices has also guaranteed an



endless supply of individualised content. In this case, the audiences are responsible for selecting the content that they desire, depending on their interest.

Whilst individual agency is celebrated as a key element of freedom, according to libertarian theories, some scholars have challenged this phenomenon. Gandy (2002) indicated that passive audiences are less informed because they tend to select entertainment at the expense of intellectually stimulating content. Fuchs (2014a) also demonstrated a trend depicting music and entertainment as having more followers on social media than writers, political commentators, and researchers. The digital divide may widen as more and more people in the digital era are becoming consumers rather than participatory citizens in the public sphere. The third level of the digital divide is also important in this study since the study investigates the potential of social media to become an alternative voice for social movements. Some benefits can be reaped by social movements using social media to advance their communication strategies and to publicise their cause and course of action.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed four theoretical traditions that can be traced from the critical theory to conceptualise this study. The four selected critical theories work in tandem in providing a conceptual framework for this study. The first theory that was reviewed is the Network Society Theory, which explains the confluence of new media and society. The ideological powers that underpin the new media were also discussed. The discussion also dwelt on the debate around social construction and technological determinism, which is very crucial in revealing how social media can become an alternative media. The second theoretical framework looks into the Public Sphere Theory from a variety of angles. The review indicates that the Public Sphere Theory is applicable to this study which perceives social media as representing the new sphere that is being explored. The discussion also looked into the alternative public spheres, such as the counter-public sphere and the African public sphere. Such alternative public spheres emerged as a result of deficiencies in the primordial ideas of the public sphere that were placing privileged citizens at the centre of the public sphere. The third theory is the Critical Political Economy Theory and speaks to the issues of capital accumulation in the digital age. This theory explicitly describes the extent to which the ownership of social media can enable or inhibit the alternative

media sphere within digital media. Lastly, the Post-Colonial Subaltern Theory speaks to the marginalised whose voice has been overwhelmed by the dominant class. This theory is relevant to this study because the era of digital media has widened the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The discussion has also touched on the multifaceted issue of the digital subaltern, which has the potential to push the voiceless to the periphery of society. The extent to which alternative media can flourish in the digital age is the subject of critical discussion in the following chapters.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: A CRITICAL, SOCIAL AND POST-COLONIAL APPROACH TO RESEARCH: THE METHODOLOGIES**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This study investigates the extent to which social media can become an alternative media platform for social movements. The study is underpinned by critical and post-colonial research paradigms. These research paradigms are very crucial to this study as they prioritise issues relating to the redress and emancipation of the colonised. Encapsulated in the research paradigms are the philosophical foundations of ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology, which frame the problem being studied as well as the choice of theories and research approaches. Precisely, this study is underpinned by the qualitative research design. The chapter also discusses in-depth interviews and social media analysis as the two qualitative data collection methods. In this case, the researcher defines each data collection method, outlines the types of interviews used and the research questions guiding the study, and thoroughly explains the data collection process.

Furthermore, the chapter also details the application of the population and sampling methods. Therefore, the chapter identifies the units of analysis, defines the target and accessible populations, and outlines the sampling process. The qualitative nature of the study determined the application of the purposive sampling method. The chapter also discusses the data analysis method, specifically the critical discourse analysis that is used to analyse data solicited from interviews. Lastly, the chapter discusses the ethical considerations the researcher adhered to throughout the study.

### **4.2 Research paradigms**

This section focuses on the research paradigm underpinning this study. Babbie (2016: 33) perceives paradigms as “fundamental models or frames of reference we use to organise our observations or reasoning”. Research paradigms are important in the sense that they offer researchers a perspective of life through a specific set of assumptions. In this case, the researcher is guided to ask relevant questions and select the appropriate research design for each study. The researcher’s location, context and ideological frames also inform the researcher’s selection of a specific research paradigm. This research is conducted in South Africa, a country that

experienced the inequalities brought by colonialism and apartheid. The researcher saw it imperative to use the critical and post-colonial indigenous paradigms to analyse data. Since the study deals with the use of the new media by the groups of social movements that represent the marginalised, it is crucial to look at the paradigms that emphasise equity and redress. In this case, the critical theories and post-colonial indigenous paradigms are appropriate for this study.

The paradigms outlined above also place the participant at the centre of the research project. This entails that one cannot study social movements without engaging them. In this case, the research participants are empowered to have a voice and determine the destiny of the research. For this reason, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews that could ascertain the participants' lived realities. The researcher interviewed the participants whilst interacting with them. Collecting data from primary sources is one of emancipating the sources by getting their voice to mainstream academic research.

#### **4.2.1 Philosophical foundations**

The researcher first discusses the philosophical foundations underpinning this study. Creswell and Poth (2016) indicate that philosophical assumptions speak to the beliefs ingrained during the researchers' education training. Such beliefs inform us about the types of problems to be studied, the nature of research questions to guide the study, the choice of theories framing the study and how the researcher goes about gathering data. Essentially, the research looks at the four philosophical underpinnings of ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology that pertain to this study. Ontology is a philosophical field that concerns the nature of reality or being and what is there in the world (Creswell and Poth 2016). Therefore, ontology is concerned with the researcher's assumption regarding the nature of the world or reality. Ontology demonstrates the extent to which the researcher brings into this study prior knowledge that informs the study. In this case, the researcher is aware of the potential of social media to give voice to the subalterns; but, at the same time, access to social media is a contested terrain that is determined by the political economy. This ontological assumption also informed the approach the researcher adopted to identify the epistemological, axiological and methodological approach underpinning this study.

The second assumption is epistemology, which concerns itself with what can be

considered as knowledge, justification of knowledge claims and the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon being researched (Creswell and Poth 2016). Initially, the study aimed at getting closer to research participants in order to understand their lived reality. However, the COVID-19 pandemic prohibited the researcher from studying the research participants in their own location and context. Although the interviews with key leaders of the social movements were conducted on video-conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Teams, the best way of getting first-hand knowledge from the participants was through field research. Therefore, this specific philosophical assumption could not be fulfilled.

The third philosophical assumption is axiology, which is concerned with the role of values in research. Creswell and Poth (2016: 20) indicate that “all researchers bring values to a study, but qualitative researchers make their values known in a study.” Thus, axiology acknowledges the researcher’s role and positionality in a study; hence, researchers are not free from an ideology that can contribute to how they view society. The researcher acknowledges that they come from a particular background that can influence their choice of a particular topic to be pursued (ontology) and also their perception of the world. Some of the social positions that can affect the researcher’s worldview include gender, race, culture, language, politics, religion, location, tribe and any other social strata.

The fourth philosophical assumption is the methodology, which concerns itself with the entire research processes. According to Creswell and Poth (2016: 21), “the processes of research are characterised as inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analysing data.” This implies that researchers are guided by their personal conventions in their selection of specific methods that they deem fit for a particular study. In this case, the choice of methodology is described in this chapter. This section discusses the various philosophical assumptions that influence the researcher’s choice of area of study, what counts as knowledge, the kind of values the researchers bring into the study and the researcher’s choice of methodology. The next section discusses the critical and decolonial paradigms, which are interpretive frameworks the researcher brings into this study.

#### 4.2.2 Critical research paradigm

This qualitative study is conducted on the basis of the critical research paradigm. The critical paradigm has its roots in interpretivism, a paradigm that is more concerned about “how people in everyday settings create meanings and interpret the events of their world” (Wimmer and Dominick 2013: 117). The interpretive paradigm has been widely used in media research. Therefore, the critical research paradigm is inspired by the interpretive paradigm, but the former is more critical in its interpretation of events and situations. Critical theorists emanated from the Frankfurt School of Thought – which encompasses German philosophers such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas. The philosophers who subscribed to the neo-Marxist approach challenged earlier paradigms by bringing the element of social change into research. The earlier paradigms of positivism, post-positivism, and constructivism only focused on prediction, explanation, and control without challenging the status quo of the established power structures (Leedy and Ormond 2020).

The earlier works of the critical research paradigm were also inspired by the Marxist critique of capitalism and accumulation (For more analysis of Marx’s critique of capitalism, see the discussion titled *Critical Political Economy of the Media* in Chapter 3, page 75). In this case, Karl Marx emphasised that those who own the means of production also possess the power to control the production of knowledge and ideas (Marx and Engels 1845). This demonstrates the extent to which the elites controlled the working class by circulating ideas that reaffirm the status quo. The unequal distribution of resources, power, hegemony and an attempt to uncover hidden agendas occupy the centre of the critical research paradigm (Wimmer and Dominick 2013). It is at this juncture that the critical research paradigm has become apparent. This paradigm was developed to emancipate the marginalised by advocating equity, redress and transformation. The rise of feminism, LGBT movements, critical race theories, Neo-Marxist Theory, the Freirean Theory, as well as participatory, emancipatory and advocacy theories was largely because of this paradigm shift.

In terms of research methodology, critical research is predominantly used in the humanities, which embraces the qualitative tradition (Wimmer and Dominick 2013). In light of the discussion above, the critical research paradigm was applied in this study because it investigates the extent to which social media can empower the less

dominant members of society. The researcher spoke to the marginalised members of the social movements to reveal their experiences regarding the use of social media to emancipate themselves and the communities they represent. The critical research paradigm was more appropriate to this study because it places more emphasis on equity, freedom, justice, empowerment and redress.

This paradigm also places the participants at the centre of the inquiry. This entails that one cannot study social movements without engaging the members of these movements to determine their lived reality. As Wimmer and Dominick (2013:148) put it, the critical paradigm “involves giving a voice to groups who are disempowered in society.” Therefore, this research aims to empower the research participants by advancing their interests and ideas. It is also important to highlight that the destiny of the research should also be determined by the research participants. For this reason, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the activists of the social movements to understand the phenomenon from their perspective. The critical discourse analysis method emanating from critical theories was used to analyse interview data (See Section 4.5 for more discussion on critical discourse analysis). This demonstrates the extent to which the critical research paradigm applies to this study.

#### **4.2.3 Post-colonial or Decolonial research paradigm**

The end of colonialism also brought about a paradigm shift in how people undertake research. According to Chilisa (2012), the post-colonial paradigm resembles the critical theories. However, this paradigm places special emphasis on formerly colonised groups. This is a niche area that many critical theorists from the Global North failed to advance. Western scholarship has long established itself as the paragon of knowledge. Curran and Park (2000) have warned against Western parochialism that has engulfed the media theories. Western parochialism has marginalised scholarly views in non-Western countries. Those scholars who encountered colonialism, apartheid and slavery identified the gap and created a new paradigm called the post-colonial paradigm. Whilst the end of colonialism did not bring any substantial or material changes to the majority of the previously oppressed groups, a decolonial paradigm was initiated to restore the lives and dignity of the dehumanised. Essential to the decolonial paradigm is the need to decolonise the minds and remove the

oppressed groups from the periphery of knowledge production. In research, the decolonial paradigm is gaining traction in an attempt to decolonise the theories and methodologies that will eventually put forth the less visible historical perspectives. Moyo and Mutsvairo (2018) believe that both the theory and methodologies that were developed from the perspective of Western scholarship do not always work in the African context. The call for the decolonisation of the theory and methodologies can be one of the things that can help advance African pedagogy and reflexive research. In terms of ontology, the researcher features and centres the voices of the marginalised group in response to the decolonial theory.

According to Chilisa (2012:18), post-colonial indigenous research in Africa is a paradigm which “emphasises transforming conventional way of knowledge production by being inclusive of multiple knowledge systems.” In terms of epistemology, the researcher approached the phenomenon of alternative media from a pluriversal perspective as opposed to a universal knowledge system. This meant that the researcher acknowledges the value of relational knowledge and other forms of knowing; hence, the focus was on allowing respondents' voices to emerge as much as possible. In line with the decolonial approach, the research treated research participants as partners by including as many quotations as possible from the interviewees. As this study was conducted in a country that experienced slavery, colonialism and apartheid, the post-colonial paradigm was regarded as fit for purpose in this research. The arrival of social media and the internet has also seen the emergence of new forms of colonialism commonly known as neo-colonialism (Moyo 2018). Unlike the previous episodes of colonialism, which were very physical, the new forms of colonialism are rather symbolic in nature. The new form of colonialism is based on capitalism and the need to make money. Those who accumulate more money are able to maintain control of the world through ‘soft power’. As a result of colonialism and its new forms, there is persistence in high levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment (triple challenge) in former colonies. Arising from the concerns of triple challenges, the researcher is interested in investigating the extent to which social media is an alternative media for various social movements.

In terms of axiology, this approach allows the researcher to critique existing knowledge formations and it also allows the emergence of multiple voices. Mano and Mukhongo



(2016) have also associated the history of alternative media with the suppressive behaviour of colonial regimes. It is very important to bring the decolonial and post-colonial paradigms to the entire understanding of alternative media because this type of media was instrumental in producing messages opposed to the dominant forces of apartheid, colonialism, capitalism and slavery. In terms of methodology, the post-colonial paradigm takes into cognisance a variety of knowledge systems that are available (Chilisa 2012). The researcher conducted interviews and social media analysis to embrace the diversity of knowledge systems.

### **4.3 Research design**

A research design is an important aspect of the research as it involves planning the research processes. Leedy and Ormond (2020: 457) describe research design as a “general structure that guides data collection and analysis in order to address a research problem.” The research design, which is also known as the philosophy of a research process, is perceived as the structure of research that describes what to do in research, how and when to undertake research processes (Babbie 2016; Leedy and Ormond 2020). Therefore, a research design is a well-laid plan which provides a structure regarding how to collect and analyse data (Leedy and Ormond 2020; Salkind 2010). In simple terms, a research design is all about planning. So, researchers should also pay special attention to the planning stage if they want to successfully execute the research project. The proverb, “failure to plan is equivalent to planning to fail”, perfectly speaks to the centrality of planning in research. Time and other resources can be wasted as a result of lack of planning. However, it is important to note that all research designs have a potential limit. The researcher’s choice of research design is determined by the availability of resources and the field of study where the research has to be conducted. This exploratory study investigates the extent to which social media tools, such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, can act as alternative media in the digital age. To investigate this phenomenon, the study applied qualitative research designs.

#### **4.3.1 Qualitative research**

During the planning process, the researcher realised that the best way of addressing the research problem was to adopt a qualitative design. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2013), qualitative research is a field of study that cuts across disciplines,

traditions and different subjects. Qualitative studies attempt to interpret the world by studying phenomena in their natural settings in order to have an interpretive approach to the world (ibid). Unlike the quantitative design, which is mostly concerned with numbers, hypotheses and prediction, without delving into the philosophical meanings behind those numbers, the qualitative design is much more concerned about the meanings attached to specific phenomena and it also helps in understanding the world. The qualitative methodology is crucial in Media and Cultural Studies since it entails an array of data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, document analysis, focus group interviews, literature studies, desktop research and case studies. The study applied qualitative research methodology which entailed the use of a combination of in-depth interviews and social media analysis. Section 4.3 details the data collection techniques used in this study.

#### **4.4 Data collection techniques**

The researcher employed qualitative research methodologies in collecting and analysing data. These methodologies were in the form of in-depth interviews and social media analysis. Various data collection methods were applied through what is called triangulation. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2013), triangulation attempts to add rigour, breadth, complexity, richness and in-depth understanding to the phenomenon being studied. The main reason for triangulating the data collection methods is to gain more information from the participants in order to satisfactorily answer questions and also to increase the reliability and validity of the research results. However, Denzin and Lincoln (2013) warned that triangulation is not a validation tool, but should be understood as an alternative to validation. The section below describes each method and how it is applicable to the study, and the kind of data that was collected. At the end of this section, the researcher also details how the research participants were recruited and determined the kind of information he sought to obtain.

##### **4.4.1 In-depth interviews**

The researcher identified the in-depth interviews as the best qualitative data collection method. According to Kelly (2010: 309), “qualitative interviews are used when the researcher wishes to gain an understanding of how participants view, experience or conceptualise an aspect of social life.” This means that in-depth interviews enable the

researcher to probe and get an in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation. Springer, Haas and Porowski (2017) also add that interviews are an excellent source of information on a variety of topics. The researcher's selection of interviews was guided by the philosophical underpinning of epistemology (see Section 4.1.1), which is concerned with what counts as knowledge and the relationship between the researcher and the phenomenon being researched.

The interviews were conducted with various leaders of social movements to determine the extent to which they use social media to communicate their alternative discourses and ascertain whether social media is a viable alternative media. The result section included many quotations from the interviewed social movement activists. In line with the decolonial approach, the research considered research participants as partners in research rather than research subjects. Using quotations ensures that their discourses are presented objectively and free from manipulations. However, there were instances where it was not always possible to quote due to expression issues, technical breaks in transmission and the inclusion of other local languages. Transcribing spoken words to text always encounters those challenges listed above. In addition, interviews are also necessary when the research participants involve people who do not come from a homogenous group (Priest 2010). Focus group interviews are best suited to study homogenous group.

The in-depth interviews allow the researcher to manage the conversation and they are flexible in the sense that the researcher can control the structure of the conversation (Priest 2010). The in-depth interviews also provide insight into a particular issue and enable the researcher to gain access to personal accounts, knowledge, behaviours, experience, opinions, values, motivations, recollections and perspectives of research subjects (Kelly 2010; Hansen and Machin 2013; Wimmer and Dominick 2013). However, the interviews are perspective in nature hence they do not give the whole truth. As a result, social media analysis was adopted as an additional data collection method used to supplement the in-depth interviews.

The purpose of conducting interviews in this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how various social movements use social media to communicate their causes. The interviews that were conducted with various members of social

movements revealed different communication patterns that were difficult to observe from the outsider's perspective. In this regard, the purpose of the interviews was to seek the inner feelings of the participants or to gain greater details from different social movements in an attempt to answer the questions guiding this study. Furthermore, the in-depth interviews also helped the researcher to broaden his knowledge and awareness of how contemporary social movements engage with social media.

Although the in-depth interviews were perceived to yield better results for this study, it is important to highlight some of its shortcomings. The main shortcoming of in-depth interviews is that they yield cumbersome data which often takes time to analyse. Furthermore, in-depth interviews are subject to interviewer bias. In this case, the interviewer may try to influence the participant to adopt a specific perspective that they subscribe to. To counter this shortcoming, the researcher was bound to remain impartial, fair and considerate in accordance with the ethical principles underpinning this study.

### *Types of interviews*

The semi-structured type of interview was used to elicit data for this study. This is the most common type of interview in qualitative research (Kelly 2010). This type of interview retains a degree of flexibility as it allows the researcher to focus on the list of predetermined questions whilst also allowing probes and follow-up questions (Du Plooy 2009; Kelly 2010). The semi-structured interviews were preferred in this study over structured and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews ask standardised and structured questions in a predetermined order and unstructured interviews allow the interviewer the freedom to ask broad and general questions (Wimmer and Dominick 2013). Therefore, semi-structured interviews are a combination of both structured and unstructured interviews, which means there is more flexibility and focus (Du Plooy 2009). The semi-structured questions allow the researcher to send the interview guide to the participants for them to prepare before the interviews (see Appendix B). The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to follow up and probe participants' answers.

### *Type of interview questions*

Since the interviews are qualitative in nature, the researcher adopted open-ended

questions to give the participants the freedom to proffer underlying ideas, express feelings, sentiments, and give suggestions from their points of view (Du Plooy 2009). According to Wimmer and Dominick (2013: 459), open-ended questions are “questions to which respondents are asked to generate an answer or answers with no prompting from the item itself.” Furthermore, open-ended interview questions also allow follow-up questions for the participants to clarify, explain or justify their standpoints during the interview. Du Plooy (2009) believes that follow-up questions are useful in clarifying a specific response to the statement made by the participants. However, the shortcoming of open-ended interviews is that they can be time-consuming and costly in terms of analysis because they do not limit the participants to a specific perspective of the research problem. As such, the researcher had to invest enough time and resources in addressing the above-mentioned shortcomings.

The researcher used the interview guide to ensure that all the research questions were answered. The interview guide consisted of a list of questions that the researcher planned to ask during the interview session (Appendix B for the interview guide). According to Priest (2010:101), an interview guide “lists the most important topics to be covered – perhaps with tentative question(s) suggested but not intended to be administered word-for-word like a survey questionnaire.” The interview guide is a key feature in the framing of an in-depth interview as this enables the interviewer to list all the important topics that the parties are going to talk about (Dingwall 1997). The interview guide assists the researcher in remembering all the topics that need to be explored in an interview. However, the interview guide does not restrict the researcher to probe specific areas of interest that might come up during the conversation since the study applied a semi-structured, open-ended interview approach (Priest 2010). As such, the interview guide is not meant to restrict but to guide the researcher to ask questions that are related to the problem the research seeks to address. During the interviews, the researcher often made follow-up questions and probed the responses the interviewees provided.

### *The process of collecting data*

In terms of the interview process, the first step of the research was to ask for permission to interview the prospective participants by contacting them via email,

social media messages or telephonic communication. After the permission was granted, the appointments with the participants were made. A mutual agreement was reached regarding the time and platform in which the interview would take place. Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher also gave informed consent forms to the interviewees. The informed consent form provided the details of the research project and also ensured that the participants were made aware of the ethical principles underpinning the study. The researcher also sent the interview guide to the interviewees to give them an idea of the nature of the answers they should prepare beforehand (the interview guide is attached as Appendix B).

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all the interviews were conducted electronically using video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft (MS) Teams or *WhatsApp* calls. In cases where there was a network problem, the interviews were conducted telephonically. In most instances, the camera functionality was turned off to avoid overloading the network bandwidth. Before the conversations began, the researcher normally requested permission to record the conversations using an in-house recorder. Platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams have an in-house recording functionality which came in handy during the interviews. The in-house recording functionality can also reconcile audio recordings that would have been interrupted due to network challenges. Additionally, the mobile phone was used as a backup recorder.

To maintain the highest level of professionalism and efficacy, the researcher assured the participants that he would not misrepresent their views. It should also be noted that the researcher was not determined to gain anything by favouring a specific view over the other. The researcher also assured the participants that the proceeds from the interviews would be strictly used for academic purposes. During the interviews, the researcher also took notes through pen and paper in order to make follow-up questions and therefore probe what the participants articulated. At the end of each interview, the researcher appreciated the interviewee for taking the time out to participate in the study and informed them that the results of this study would be shared with them once they were published.

### **Focus group interviews (cancelled)**

The initial plan of this research included conducting focus-group interviews with the

members of the five selected social movements. The researcher noted that it would be insufficient for the leaders of the social movements to speak for or on behalf of their members. The rationale for using focus-group interviews was to answer the calls of people centism which is the key tenet of the post-colonial indigenous paradigm. This paradigm indicates that the best way to understand the community or people is by interacting with them in their environment to determine their lived reality. The focus-group interviews sought to ascertain how they used social media to organise themselves and interact on social media.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible for the researcher to conduct focus-group interviews due to the COVID-19-induced restrictions and the risks of contracting the disease. Despite the restrictions at the national level, the University of KwaZulu-Natal also issued guidelines that suspended field research. Even when the restrictions were relaxed, the dangers of meeting whilst the virus was still lingering around far outweighed the benefits of such meetings. Although the online mode of communication, such as video conferencing, was recommended, such efforts were not going to be practical. Given that the focus-group interviews were intended towards the members of the social movement who are digital subalterns in most instances, it would have been a mission to get them connected on video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Skype or MS Teams at the same time.

During the in-depth interviews, the researcher noted that it was often difficult to interact with the leaders of the social movements due to connectivity problems. Some interviews were finalised telephonically because of network problems. This gave the researcher the impression that the focus-group interviews would not be feasible. Due to a lot of network issues that persisted during the interviews with the activists of social movements, the researcher saw it fit to discontinue the focus-group interviews. Clearly, the focus-group interviews would not have been possible due to the digital divide which is an everyday reality for many unemployed, landless and poor South Africans. Not everyone has access to smartphones, mobile internet, or a strong network connection. By excluding those who are not connected would lead to the biasness in the study, because the researcher wanted to include a variety of views from those who are connected and disconnected.

#### **4.4.2 Social Media Analysis**

Although the digital revolution provides new platforms that make it easy for researchers to obtain information, analysing such information is often a cumbersome process. The researcher has to select the type of information that needs to be analysed carefully. This social media analysis has its foundation in the content analysis technique. The discussion below details how the study conducted a content analysis of social media. Wimmer and Dominick (2013:55) indicate that “modern content analysis can be traced back to WWII when allied intelligent units painstakingly monitored the number and types of popular songs played in European radio stations.” Therefore, social media analysis is the study of recorded discourses on social media to scrutinise and understand the meaning of each text. As one of the popular data collection methods or analysis, social media analysis is used to analyse recorded discourses on social media such as texts, video, audio, works of art, infographics and images.

Social media has brought changes, hence various scholars have since conducted their studies using social media analysis (Auoragh and Alexander 2011; Bosch 2016 or 2017a; Daniels 2016; Fuchs 2014; Matsilele and Ruhanya 2021; Mukhudwana 2020; Peoll and Borra 2011; Wilson and Dunn 2011). Although several studies have conducted social media analysis, the application of the analysis varies from one study to another. Bosch (2017a) refers to it as social network analysis. This is done through a software package called NodeXL, which reveals frequencies, clusters and influence. In this instance, NodeXL is a quantitative analysis tool that does not reveal the qualitative responses. Matsilele and Ruhanya (2021) also analysed social media dissidence in Zimbabwe. They used Netnography, which is an adaptation of ethnography for the online world. This normally involves observing a particular phenomenon on social media, such as a hashtag, profile or a set of behaviour. Auoragh and Alexander (2011) also observed social media during the Arab Springs protest.

Social media analysis can be used to analyse both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative method is a non-frequency model, which analyses interviews, text, documents and books. Qualitative analysis also provides a valuable historical and cultural analysis of the text (Gunter 2000). On the contrary, the quantitative method is



a frequency method that analyses statistics-related data. Quantitative analysis involves the analysis of the amount of something (data or content) found on social media. The main distinction between qualitative and quantitative analyses is that the former analyses latent messages (hidden meanings of the text) and the latter analyses manifest messages. The qualitative analysis was applied in this study because the researcher wanted to explain the actions of social movements on social media. The meaning behind the specific media texts was unpacked by utilising qualitative social media analysis.

To narrow the scope of this project, the study focused on two social media platforms, which are *Twitter* and *Facebook*. These two social media platforms are widely used by many people around the world and carry more data. The social media pages of the following social movements were analysed: *#feesmustfall*, *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, *Unemployed People's Movements*, *Landless People's Movement* and *Equal Education*. In addition, the cases of socio-political importance from the social media pages of social movements were followed on *Twitter* and *Facebook* through hashtags. Keyword searches that included discussions on *#feesmustfall*, *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, *Unemployed People's Movement*, *Landless People's Movement* and *Equal Education* were conducted.

This study analysed *Twitter* and *Facebook* feeds, pages and hashtags in order to determine the extent to which social media is an alternative media that can challenge the hegemony in the era of digitisation. The researcher observed how each social movement used social media for campaigning, the meaning of the messages, to establish the ideological conceptions of text, the type of message, how often they posted messages on social media, social media engagements and the number of followers they have. This helped in terms of determining the popularity and success of each social media campaign. Due to information overload emanating from the text that can be extracted from social media, this study only focuses on text produced between April 2019 and March 2020. The exception, in this case, was the *#feesmustfall* movement which was most active in 2015. The *#feesmustfall* dataset that was analysed ranged from October 2015 to November 2015 (one month). The information overload prompted the researcher to focus on the first month of the movement. The researcher also used judgemental sampling to select texts that were suitable for

analysis. In this case, the data subset relating to the potential of social media in becoming an alternative media was analysed.

The shortcoming of social media analysis relates to the digital divide. Bosch (2017b) notes that social media does not represent the entire subsets of the population due to the digital divide. As such, any findings of research conducted on social media should not be generalised to the entire population. In an attempt to counterbalance this shortcoming, the study also conducted in-depth interviews for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. The personal accounts of the researcher, who is a social media user, were also adopted to analyse complex events and interpret the situations which permeate social media. This phenomenon is guided by the philosophical underpinning of axiology (see Section 5.1.1) which recognises the value that researchers bring to the research. This exploratory study, which is also qualitative in nature, only seeks to create a better understanding of the phenomenon in question. Therefore, it is not the intention of the researcher to generalise the findings to the entire population.

## **4.5 Population and sampling methods**

The following sub-section discusses the unit of analysis, population and sampling techniques involved in the selection of research participants.

### **4.5.1 Unit of analysis**

According to Bornman (2009), a unit of analysis refers to sampling elements such as individuals, organisations and the media. Since the research is bent on determining how social media has co-opted alternative voices from social movements, the unit of analysis is going to be twofold:

- members of the social movements, and
- social media accounts or hashtags of the social movements.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the leaders of the social movements to understand how they used social media as their alternative media. On the other side, the researcher conducted a social media analysis to determine how various social movements used social media as an alternative media. The in-depth interviews and social media analysis were supplemented by the extensive literature

study, which was foundational to this study.

#### **4.5.2 Population**

Babbie (2010) describes a population as a group of people who constitute the focus of the study or a group of people on which the study wishes to draw conclusions. Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) explain that before a researcher can select a sample, he or she has to define the population of interest. In this case, the researcher should make a distinction between target and accessible population. According to Bornman (2009), target population refers to the total population that the researcher intends to study. This means that all the social movements in South Africa formed part of the target population. It was almost impossible for the researcher to study all the social movements within South Africa; hence, the research only dealt with the population that was accessible to him. The researcher selected six social movements to conduct in-depth interviews with their conveners or leaders and also carry out a social media analysis of the social movement's social media pages. The sampling process is detailed below.

#### **4.5.3 Sampling**

The interviewees were selected using the purposive or judgemental sampling method. Purposive sampling means that the researcher can select the interviewee on the basis of their knowledge of a particular subject (Bornman 2009). In the context of this study, the participants were selected on the basis that they held considerable knowledge on the subject. As such, the researcher deemed it fit to conduct the interviews with leaders of the social movements, such as *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, *Unemployed People's Movement*, *Landless People's Movement*, *Equal Education* and *#feesmustfall* (see Appendixes C - G for the transcripts). A movement like *#feesmustfall* is organic and leaderless; in this case, the onus was on the researcher to select the most experienced activist. Currently, there is little information available on these movements. However, the researcher is interested in finding out how these movements use social media to communicate their causes within and outside their movements.

#### **4.6 Data analysis and interpretation**

This study intends to use the critical discourse analysis (CDA) technique to interpret the data obtained from in-depth interviews. According to Priest (2010:223), discourse

analysis is a “method for looking at argumentation and dialogue in a systematic way ... this idea is similar to rhetorical analysis and some scholars use the terms interchangeably.” CDA is a crucial method of analysing text or spoken words to reveal social dynamics, inequality and the digital divide (Van Dijk 1998). Fairclough (2011) divided the concept into two to understand critical discourse analysis and its importance. The first word is ‘critical’, which entails using rational thinking to question prevailing arguments. The second word is ‘discourse’, a socially constructed word encompassing the meaning-making process and the interactions between people. Therefore, discourse consists of situations, objects of knowledge, social interactions between people, and relationships between people. Discourse is socially constructive in that it helps sustain the social status quo, contributes to the transformation of the social structures, and gives rise to unequal distribution of power (ibid). Wodak and Ludwig (1999) also believe that discourse prevails in circumstances involving power relations and ideologies.

The discourse analysis method is helpful in this study because it goes beyond focusing on the text. Van Dijk (1998) indicated that discourse analysis focuses on analysing different structures involved in the meaning-making process, social processes and the economic or political base at which the text is produced. This data analysis method details why certain groups of people use social media as alternative media and the challenges that they encounter. It is also helpful in explaining the power base of mainstream media and the origins of socio-political challenges that marginal groups face. As such, Van Dijk (1988:2) argues that “discourse is not simply an isolated textual or dialogic structure”. This entails that discourse goes beyond focusing on the text by analysing the different structures, social processes and production processes of text (Van Dijk 1988). CDA was used in this study to suggest how power relationships within society are reflected in using social media and how the traditional media represent their viewpoints. From a sociolinguistic point of view, CDA is not only dedicated to studying the text but can also describe the underlying consequences that lead to a specific disorder in the functioning of society or an institution (Wodak 1996).

Fairclough et al. (2011:358) argue that “CDA openly and explicitly positions itself on the side of the dominated or oppressed groups and against dominating groups”. In his analysis of media discourse, Fairclough (1995) also studied the political economy of

the media. Key CDA authors like Wodak and Ludwig (1999) also consider that different interpretations of the same text may arise due to the reader's background knowledge, ideological frames, culture and social status. Furthermore, Wodak and Ludwig (1999: 122) argued that "the right interpretation does not exist; ... interpretations can be more or less plausible or adequate, but they cannot be true". In this case, the researcher's underlying ideological frames or axiology may determine his interpretation of a particular text. This entails that various meanings may be deduced from the same text because discourses are socially constructed.

Fairclough et al. (2011) also identified the role that language plays in social processes. As a social act, language continues to be used to increase power relationships within a particular society by marginalising people. CDA aims to deal with messages and meanings in socio-cultural settings or in the context of political economy rather than in isolated elements (Priest 2010). Van Dijk (1995: 66) points out the following criteria as the requirement for CDA:

- Examining the discourse within its historical, political, and social contexts;
- Examining the background of a conflict and its main participants;
- Analysing the main characters, the stakeholders that are involved, power relations and conflicts of interest;
- Identifying positive and negative opinions about 'Us versus Them'; and
- Examining all formal structures in a way that helps to (de)emphasise polarised group opinions.

In addition, CDA is also used to analyse the politics of the media, which is a powerful ideological institution. As such, the media plays a role in reproducing social relations of domination and exploitation (Fairclough 1995). The media is an instrument of hegemony because it serves the elite class, the powerful and the State. Therefore, CDA was applied in this study to critically analyse the extent to which the new media hegemony could be used to prioritise the issues of the elites at the expense of the marginalised. Alternatively, social media analysis was used to analyse data collected through social media.

#### **4.7 Ethical considerations**

Since the research involved interviews conducted with human subjects from different backgrounds, special measures were taken to protect and respect the welfare of all the participants. Even though the interviews were not very sensitive in nature, the researcher was duty-bound to apply for ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. In September 2019, the ethical clearance was approved by the University of KwaZulu-Natal under the following protocol: Reference Number: HSS/0465/019D. Each participant in this study was also given informed consent forms to sign before partaking in the study (Appendix A: Informed Consent). Included in the informed consent form was an explanation of the purpose of the study and its ethical implications.

The informed consent also disclosed to the participants the fact that the interview was voluntary and that they had a right to withdraw from the interview at any stage if they felt too uncomfortable to continue. The participants were also assured that they would not be asked embarrassing or humiliating questions. The researcher also provided the interview guide to the participants in order to ascertain the type of conversation that would take place during the interview. The researcher also assured the participants that the research findings would be reported in such a manner that would respect their wishes and that the information obtained during the conversation would be used for academic purposes only. The participants were also given an option to have their names concealed if they were worried about privacy. However, all the participants were not bothered about having their real names used in the study. As activists in social movements, their involvement in such a social movement would be highly publicised. Therefore, their names were also used in the study. This is in line with the decolonial approach, which says that research participants should no longer be regarded as research subjects but as partners in research. The research should uplift the subaltern and help advocate their cause, thus bringing subaltern politics to the fore.

#### **4.8 Limitations**

The first and foremost limitation is that a study involving humans as cultural beings can produce several realities. The different cultural contexts, ideologies, and perceptions often make it difficult to have a single understanding of human beings. As

such, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other contexts because of the dynamic and complex nature of social relations. Over time and space, human subjects are socialised differently by the various axiologies in which they exist.

The foremost importance of this study is that the area of new media is dynamic and characterised by fast-changing technological developments. Conducting a study in a fast-paced environment is always a mammoth task for researchers. In addition, the study of social media is very broad and such a study requires a multifaceted approach. Social media calls for new approaches to social inquiry.

Another limitation involved a lack of resources and time, resulting in the researcher failing to reach out to all the social movements. Only a manageable number of social movements could be interviewed. The other limitation emanated from the COVID-19 pandemic which restricted human contact. The researcher initially proposed to conduct face-to-face and focus-group interviews with ordinary members of social movements; however, due to the heightened cases of COVID-19 in South Africa, it became unsafe for the researcher and the participants to converge. As such, the researcher settled for video conferencing and telephonic interviews in order to solicit participants' views. However, the researcher still believed that field research would have been the best way of soliciting ideas from the organisers and members of the social movements. Field research would have made it easy to see the participants' reactions and expressions. Nevertheless, the research was conducted at a time when the conditions were no longer conducive for field research. The COVID-19 pandemic, which spread through human contact, required everyone to maintain social distance, thus limiting human contact.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research also indefinitely suspended the focus-group interviews. Although online focus groups were the most readily available option, the research envisaged the difficulties related to getting several people who are mostly digital subalterns together in an online space. The researcher also noted that there might be limitations in terms of getting people to connect online due to a lack of compatible devices, data or network coverage. Conducting a focus group online was also going to lead to biases in the study as the study was interested in interviewing those who were both online and offline because it is understandable that the digital

divide may impede other people's access to information. Therefore, focus-group interviews could have assisted the researcher in having access to a variety of voices.

To counter the limitations experienced in this study, the researcher plans to undertake related studies in future. The recommendation section in the conclusion chapter (Chapter 10) elaborated on areas of study that can be pursued to close the knowledge gap. The recommendation section also presented some of the areas of study that were deemed beyond the scope of this research.

#### **4.9 Conclusion**

To investigate the extent to which social media (*Facebook* and *Twitter*) have the potential of becoming alternative media for the social movement, this chapter discussed the research methodologies that were used to carry out the objectives of this study. This study adopted the research paradigm of critical, social and postcolonial research paradigms as it attempts to understand the extent to which social movements use social media to articulate their alternative discourses. In order to add rigour, depth and breadth to the study, the researcher adopted the triangulation method. Data collection methods, such as in-depth interviews and social media analysis, were applied since the research approach embraced various knowledge systems. The chapter also discussed critical discourse analysis as the chosen method of analysing the discourses arising from in-depth interviews. In addition, the ethical considerations that had to be followed during the study were also deliberated and with the limitations thereafter. The chapter also outlined the limitations the researcher encountered. The COVID-19 pandemic also changed the course of this research. Resultantly, the focus-group interviews were suspended indefinitely.



## CHAPTER FIVE: TOWARD THE DIGITAL ALTERNATIVES: A SOCIAL MEDIA HOPE

### 5.1 Introduction

Undoubtedly, social media presents the best possible alternative platform for social movements to share information. A participant had this to say:

*Social media does not discriminate; it does not look at someone's socio-economic background. It does not look at someone's intelligence. As soon as you press the button, it sends the message as it is. It is up to the recipient to agree or disagree with the message. Social media has been great for impoverished people in the sense that it does not discriminate in any way (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

Within the context of this statement, it is imperative to look into the survival tactics of alternative media within the contemporary digital context through the lens of selected South African social movements, which include the *#feesmustfall*<sup>2</sup>, *Equal Education*<sup>3</sup>, *Abahlali baseMjondolo*<sup>4</sup>, *Unemployed People's Movement*<sup>5</sup> and *Landless People's Movement*<sup>6</sup>. These social movements represent the marginalised people, such as the poor students, the shack dwellers, and the landless who have first-hand experience regarding the opportunities that social media presents to their members. This chapter responds to the first research question, which seeks to understand how social movements use social media to communicate their alternative discourses. In terms of the participants' responses during the interviews, it is incumbent upon the researcher to highlight that all the social activists agree that social media does benefit their members to a certain extent. The discussion section also revisits the theoretical underpinnings of the network society in an attempt to explain the prospect of social

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<sup>2</sup>The *#feesmustfall* is a student movement which emerged in South Africa in 2015. The movement was created to fight against the high cost of the University fees and to fight for a decolonised curriculum.

<sup>3</sup>*Equal Education* is a member-based mass democratic movement of learners, post-school youth, parents and community members striving for quality and equality in South African education, through activism and analysis (Equal Education 2022).

<sup>4</sup>*Abahlali baseMjondolo* is a movement that represents the people who stay in the informal settlement or the landless. The movement is based in KZN with representation nationwide.

<sup>5</sup>*Unemployed People's Movement* represents the unemployed and the poor people in South Africa. They fight all forms of social ills. The movement is based in Makhanda, Eastern Cape but has branches all over the country.

<sup>6</sup>*Landless People's Movement* represents the poor and landless people in South Africa. The movement is based in Limpopo with branches throughout the country.

media in empowering social movements.

## 5.2 The use of social media within the social movements

Curran (2012) noted that the internet effectively links the activists, facilitating their interaction and helping them to mobilise. In this case, there is no doubt that social media is a beacon of hope for the social movements that are getting their discourses out to the public. Evidence from this research suggests that social movements use a variety of social media platforms to communicate their discourses. The responses indicate the extent to which social media is largely employed by social movements. The use of *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *WhatsApp* is noticeable in various social movements. It is also common for social movements to adopt a specific social media platform due to its accessibility, applicability, cost-effectiveness, and user-friendliness.

*If you want to post a video of a protest or a violent arrest, you put it up on Vine, Instagram, or Periscope. If you want to avoid trolls or snooping authorities and you need to coordinate some kind of action, you might chat privately with other activists on GroupMe. If you want to rapidly mobilise a bunch of people you know and you don't want the whole world clued in, you use SMS or WhatsApp. If you want to mobilise many people, you might not know and you do want the whole world to talk about it: Twitter. (Stephen 2015).*

This utterance entails that social movement activists have to think thoroughly about the social media they want to use and the outcome they want to see. Mthombeni (2022 interviewee) emphasises the need to understand the target audience. Evidence suggests that traditional social movements, such as the *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (ABM), *Landless People's Movement* (LPM), *Equal Education* (EE) and the *Unemployed People's Movement* (UPM) tend to use *Facebook* as opposed to *Twitter*. *Facebook* is a type of social network that links family, friends and people who are likely to know each other. The accessibility of *Facebook* is also bolstered by the availability of *Facebook Free Mode*<sup>7</sup>. Alternatively, *Twitter* is a social network that links people from various walks of life who might not know each other. In this case, social movements like *#feesmustfall*, which resonated well with the cause of various students around the country, used *Twitter*. Through intensive planning, social movements are able to

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<sup>7</sup> Facebook Free Mode offered by networks such as *Vodacom* and *CellC* is the lite version of Facebook which can be used without internet. However, the Facebook Free Mode does not show pictures, videos or open various links the external sites.

identify the social media platform that can help them achieve their own objectives. The study focuses more specifically on *Facebook* and *Twitter* since these are the two platforms that are easy to follow and observe. The pages, groups, and hashtags on *Twitter* and *Facebook* are accessible to the public.

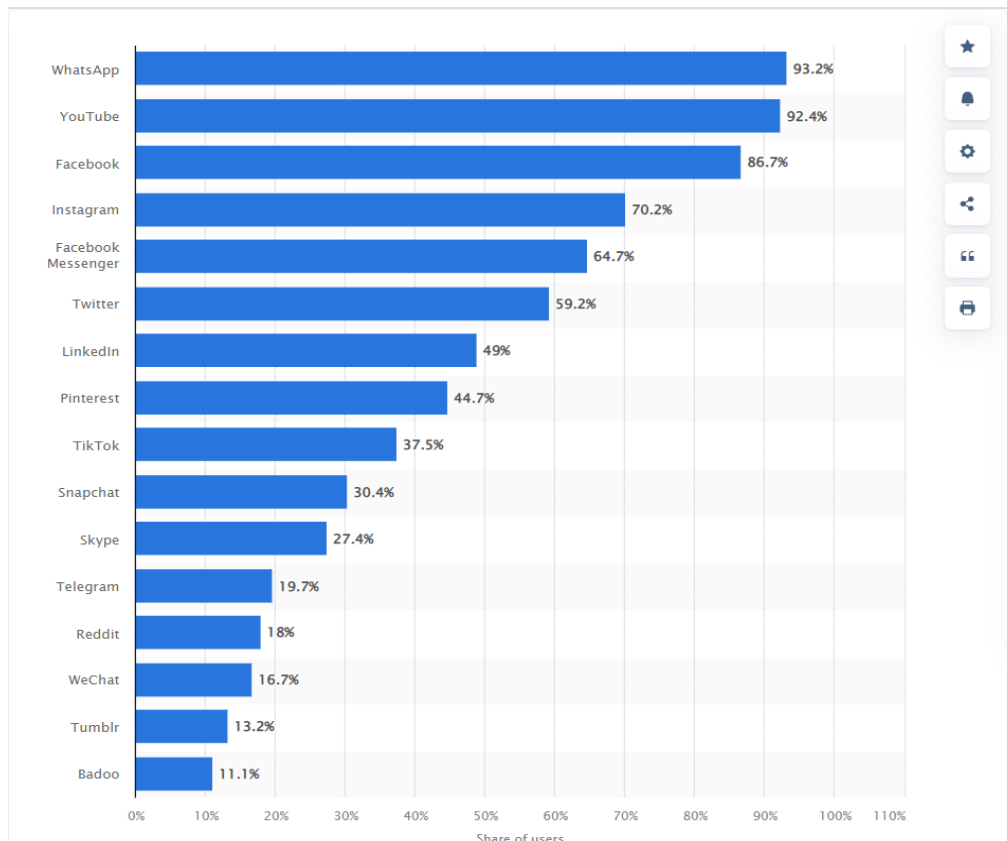


Figure 1: The most used social media in South Africa as of the third quarter of 2020 (Statista 2020)

In addition to *Facebook* and *Twitter*, social media platforms such as *WhatsApp* and *YouTube* are among the most commonly used platforms, though they did not form part of the analysis in this research. Although there is a possibility of using *WhatsApp* to challenge the mainstream media hegemony through chain messages, *WhatsApp* Statuses and *WhatsApp* groups, such data is highly encrypted. Thus, access to information on *WhatsApp* is not guaranteed. On the other hand, the presence of social movements on *YouTube* is very limited due to the production skills that are required in editing videos. It is also important to note that *YouTube* requires a high bandwidth of data from end users and this is what some members of social movements may struggle to have. Therefore, *Facebook* and *Twitter* are the most commonly used

platforms that have the potential to facilitate alternative media reporting. According to Statista (2020), *Facebook* reaches out to 20 million South African adults at any given month. Social media has become an important tool for mobilising and organising people, getting things done as well as activating collective dissent. The following sections provide various reasons why social movements adopt social media to communicate their discourses.

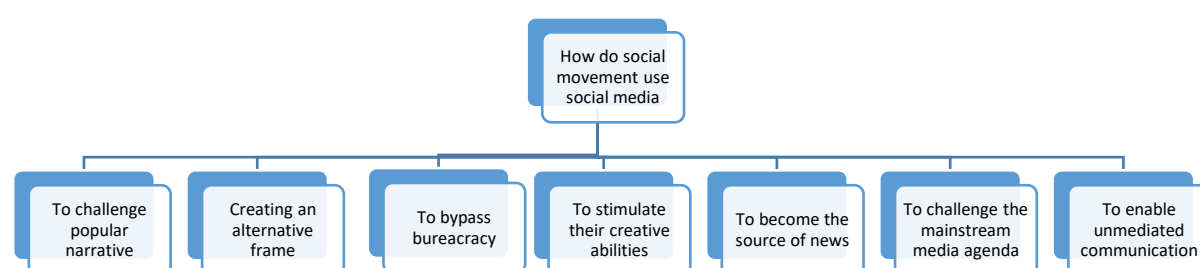


Figure 2: The social media usage model to demonstrate the main reason why social movements adopt social media

### 5.2.1 Social media challenge the popular narrative

Social media has assisted in terms of bringing forward the topics that were often ignored by the mainstream media (Kamp 2016). Similar views were also shared by an activist who commends social media for enabling them to challenge the popular narrative advanced by the media (Kalla 2020 interviewee; Stephen 2015; Zikode 2020 interviewee). Thus, an activist belonging to the *ABM* indicated that: “*Social media have given us the voice to tell the stories that are untold and are not celebrated*” (Zikode 2020, interviewee). The view that social media enables activists to challenge the popular narrative was also echoed by Stephen (2015), who was part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Stephen (2015) indicated that social media “*could swiftly push back against spurious media narratives with the force of a few thousand retweets.*” This portrays the notion that many activists from various walks of life agree that social media can allow them to challenge popular narratives.

Various scholars have also found that the media coverage of the protests tended to

focus on the violent aspects rather than the real stories behind the protests (Bennet 2003; Bosch and Mutsvairo 2017; Nkuna 2016; Radu, Morwe and Bird 2012). The narrative that is already painted by the mainstream media is the dominant one. Such a narrative seems to dismiss social movements as violent and irrelevant. In addition to mainstream media narratives of social movements, Tuck (2009 in Calderon 2016) adds that vulnerable communities are often framed against damage-centred and deficit frameworks which tend to emphasise brokenness, poverty, poor health, etcetera (Tuck quoted in Calderon 2016). So, even though there are alternative stories emerging from vulnerable spaces, mainstream media may not have the frames to properly present such stories.

One of the *#feesmustfall* activists emphasised the point on the need to challenge the variety of narratives.

*We had to keep track of and ... to control the messaging and to challenge the false narrative that comes out from other media. Such narratives were not always false, but were negative towards students, particularly what they were doing. We had to come up with ways of making people understand that what we were doing was important and worth supporting. I think that to a large extent, in 2015, we were able to successfully challenge the narratives. So, we started as hooligans on day one and by day ten, we were heroes* (Kalla 2020, interviewee).

Not only did the social movement use social media to challenge the existing narrative, but it also used social media to create an alternative frame. For instance, earlier during the *#feesmustfall* movement, one of the DJs (Disc Jockey) at East Coast Radio referred to the students as trash. As the movement grew bigger, the DJ changed his tune and invited the *#feesmustfall* activists to their show. This portrays the notion that social media effectively elicited sympathy from members of the public and also enabled the students to create an alternative frame of the protest.

### **5.2.2 To create an alternative frame**

Social movements are advocating the struggle for better allocation of resources through protests and various activism. Therefore, the social movements that are counterposed to elite media are also involved in the struggle for the creation of a better frame for their protests. The advancement of social media means that social

movements are now able to circulate their own discourses, thus enabling them to create an alternative frame of protest. The digital spaces have since disrupted the traditional communication system that gave so much power to the owners of the media. According to Kupe (2021), the mainstream media contributes to what the general populace should think about and how to think about it. A study conducted by Bennett (2003:17) indicated that “many activists are sharply critical of mass media coverage, charging that the press and officials have criminalised their protest behaviours.” Mainstream media reports of social movements’ activities are often characterised by a negative tone, which is intended to conceal various injustices being perpetrated and perpetuated by the elites. A similar view is also shared by South African social activists who believe that the mainstream media is misrepresenting the views of social movements (Kalla 2020; Zikode 2020 interviewees). Zikode (2020, interviewee) highlighted the view that activists used social media and their websites because the mainstream media rejected them and their cause.

Social media effectively allows social movements to set the record straight in terms of their cause. As indicated by Bosch and Mutsvairo (2017), social media allows social movements to provide an alternative frame for the protests which challenge the mainstream media reporting. The #feesmustfall indicated that they often used social media to challenge the narrative that is already in the media because much of the reporting on the mainstream media would portray students as hooligans and instigators of violence (Kalla 2020 interviewee). In this case, if the media incorrectly reported some of the stories of #feesmustfall, they would go to social media to assert their own side of the story. A participant said:

*Social media gives us an alternative voice to contest a popular narrative in the mainstream media; for example, there was an incident where a few students were standing on the road and were run into by a car. That was very deliberate and the intention was to harm us. The students ran after the car and stopped it at the garage and they started vandalising it with the person inside it. There was a newspaper that caught the guy on camera whilst in the car. The guy had been bruised on his forehead. The traditional media reported it without putting into context the students’ concerns. The media reporters hardly bothered to understand why the students were so angry that they responded so violently towards him. He literally drove into us, injuring a few students; so, it is the very contextual reporting that portrayed students as hooligans*

*with police being present on campus (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

As such, activists find social media as a place where they can freely and directly voice their concerns to various audiences without mediation. The extent to which social media enables social movements to bypass the traditional communication processes seems to be one of the activists' strongest drawcards. As the mainstream media often misrepresents their views, the proponents of the social movements now use social media to create an alternative frame of protest. Social media is seen as a social justice factor, enabling social movements to challenge existing narratives.



Figure 3: A student giving flowers to police to depict love and peace (Source: GroundUp 2016)

As seen in Figure 3, the University of Witwatersrand students wanted to create an alternative frame of protest which is characterised by love and peace. The flower gesture was intended to ease the tension between the police and students and to improve the general outlook of the protest.

### 5.2.3 Using social media to bypass bureaucracy

Various social movements indicated that they used social media to bypass the traditional structures of power. Shaera Kalla, who was part of the *#feesmustfall*

movement, demonstrated the extent to which the *#feesmustfall* used social media platforms such as *Twitter* to bypass the university system of communication.

*We had to send our communique to the students through management. We could not just directly access the database, so we worked around that issue (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

In this type of setup, the university often delayed or censored activists' communications. These frustrations often compelled them to come up with their own ways of communicating with their constituency (students). Social media became the most potent tool used to bypass the bureaucratic setups that were used to delay their communications. This finding is in line with the findings of Mpofu (2014) and Moyo (2014) who indicated that when ordinary citizens are not given a platform to voice their discontent, they are likely to utilise online spaces to do so. This shows that technology is socially constructed. Similar activities were also observed during the apartheid era, when the ANC's Radio Freedom was able to broadcast illegally in a secret location (Mosia et al. 1994; Lloyd et al. 2010). This demonstrates a situation where protesters become innovative in order to bypass bureaucracy and gatekeepers.

On the other side, *ABM*, *LPM*, and *UPM* activists also raise some concerns regarding censorship at the hands of the State agencies. Sbu Zikode of *ABM* indicated that the greatest threat they encountered was State-sponsored violence, cutting down and criminalisation of activists. The activist also indicated that in some instances, their phone calls were bugged and redirected to the police station.

*I had an experience of phoning my own comrades knowing exactly that such number belonged to the comrade, but to my surprise, it was answered at the police station and I could actually hear that I contacted the police station because I could hear the communication radios all over. Double checking to ascertain that I had the correct number of these comrades; of course, the police did not answer, but they were speaking amongst themselves showing that for some reason the number had been redirected to the police stations. So, that is my personal experience and of course, I have been outside of the country and when I came back, I received this unknown number from officers of what used to be called the National Intelligence Agencies. They would call me and ask me questions about where I have been to and what I was discussing with those people (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*



Similar fears were also expressed by the *LPM* activist Africa Mthombeni, who suspected that some of their calls were often diverted when they were dealing with topical matters that affected the authority.

*We suspect that we are being hacked and that other people are also reporting that they are hearing our discussions. Some people encouraged us to deal with call divert and they have shown me how to do that because there are people who are trying to hijack our calls, especially when we are having topical matters that affect the powers that be (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee).*

Sikhumbuzo Soxujwa of *UPM* also believed that they were being viewed as a threat after winning the case against Makhanda<sup>8</sup> Municipality.

*We are recognised as one of the most dangerous social movements across South Africa because of what we did with the Municipality of Makhanda. That has never happened in the political history of South Africa. So, we have set an example of how to deal with corrupt local politicians; so, they are unhappy about that. We do have the feeling that our conversations - when we are using our cell phones to communicate are being monitored or spied on. So, we do not discuss our critical issues or our security issues over the phone. So, what is likely to happen is that I will phone my secretary or spokesperson to find a place to meet and talk about our issues and then we are off. So, when I am there, we could talk more and more and dwell on what we want to talk about but on the phone it's not safe (Soxujwa 2020, interviewee).*

Therefore, the interception of phone calls “*compromises the section<sup>9</sup> of the constitution that guarantees the right to privacy and freedom of expression*” (Zikode 2020, interviewee). Swart, quoted in Sewchurran (2016), describes the South African surveillance system where the normal communication sent via cell-phones passes through the network and it is duplicated at the switching centres. The two identical signals are separated and sent to the receiving cell-phone and the Office of Interception Centres (OIC). Here, OIC staff can review the communication and record it and deem it relevant. The communication would then be sent to SAPS and the SSA

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<sup>8</sup>In January 2020, the Unemployment People’s Movement won the case that led to the dissolving of Makhanda Municipal council. The case relates to the lack of service delivery by Makhanda Municipality. This was the first time in the history of South Africa that the court decided to dissolve the municipal council over the outcry of service delivery.

<sup>9</sup>Section 16 (1) of the Bill of Rights guarantees the right to freedom of expression.

(State Security Agency). In this case, Duncan (2021) has noted an increase in the criminalisation of protests in an attempt to maintain control and suppress dissent voices. It is further stated that the criticism emanating from the militarisation of police during the Marikana Disaster has led the police to implement covert forms of social control and increase intelligence-led policing (Duncan 2021). These less visible forms of policing include interception of communication which various activists have suspected was being practised to frustrate them. The massive arrests and convictions of students during the *#feesmustfall* also demonstrate the State's serious efforts to silence dissenting voices which manifest in protests.

In this case, the LPM activists find social media to be a space where they can express themselves freely.

*I think we have ownership of social media because the management of those platforms seems to be respecting us a lot. We have never got complaints about moral or ethical issues on our part and vice versa* (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee).

In this case, whatever the protestors write or record on social media has never been challenged. However, the assertion that social media are not susceptible to surveillance has been challenged by various scholars (Zuboff 2019; Stephen 2015). Stephen (2015) has taken note of a situation in which many members of Black Lives Matter are monitored by law enforcement agencies. Therefore, the argument that social media can help subvert government surveillance is farfetched.

#### **5.2.4 Social media as a creative space**

Various studies have demonstrated that people who are denied a voice always find creative space to voice their opinions and concerns (Matsilele and Ruhanya 2021; Moyo 2014; Mpofu 2014). Recently, social media platforms have introduced new forms of expression such as *Facebook Live* and *Twitter* spaces. These new forms of expression allow ordinary members of society to become producers and presenters of their own rights.

An activist from the *#feesmustfall* movement indicated that “*we were very creative in how we used social media*” (Kalla 2020, interviewee). University students are always in a better position to unleash their creative abilities because the university curriculum is designed in a way that enables creativity and critical thinking. In addition, an activist

belonging to EE also mentioned that they used social media as a creative space because the mainstream media hardly covers all their activities. They reportedly used social media to write about their experiences, unleash their poetic experiences, connect with others, make voice notes, and other forms of expression. The activist said:

*We cannot have our experiences and our struggles broadcast on the news all day every day. For instance, when we have had EE members on TV or radio, they can maybe accommodate one EE member or two, but they cannot accommodate five. It is a particular type of interaction in that sense but with social media, equalisers<sup>10</sup> can be creative. So, last week, equalisers sent through to us their experiences of being back at school and we posted that information on our social media and they could write about their experiences, they could rap about their experiences, they could write poems, they could make voice notes; so, in that way, there is more creativity of expression (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee).*

On the other hand, the *#feesmustfall* activists indicated that they used humour to tell their stories. Kalla (2020, interviewee) describes the use of humour as a creative way of getting the attention of university management. Mpofu (2021) wrote about the politics of laughter to challenge those in power. This demonstrates that marginalised people use social media to express humour in an attempt to make their political statements heard. The humour is expressed through memes, text, images and short videos. The popularity of Tik-Tok social media is partly because of its humorous elements.

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<sup>10</sup> Equalisers refers to the members of Equal Education movement (mostly school learners).



Figure 4: The extent to which the student used humour to tell their stories (Source: *#feesmustfall* 2015 – part of social media analysis)

As demonstrated in Figure 4 above, protesting students used funny visuals to compare the Vice Chancellor to Marie Antoinette. Marie Antoinette, who was the Queen of France from 1774 - 1792, uttered the following statement: "Let them eat cake" when protestors confronted her about a lack of bread in the monarch. The statement demonstrated a lack of accountability on the side of the queen because a cake was seen as a luxurious item when compared to bread. In this case, the adherents of the *#feesmustfall* movement also used this statement to portray a lack of accountability on the part of their Vice-Chancellor, Adam Habib. Habib was accused of evading accountability because he was shifting the blame for high student fees to the South African government (Kalla 2020, interviewee). Although the visual has an element of

humour, it signifies a strong political statement. This portrays a high degree of creativity on the part of the students.

### **5.2.5 Social media as a source of news**

According to Fenton (2017), social movements are bound to establish their own independent media because of the belief that mainstream media are not accurately reporting their activities. In the digital age, social movements that do not have the capital to establish their own independent media are using social media to report their activities. For instance, the *#feesmustfall*, *ABM* and *Equal Education* published their stories on their own social media pages such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*. According to Kalla (2020, interviewee), “*the media would directly take things from our social media and use that as a source.*” Once certain stories have been uploaded on *Facebook* – various media groups also cover them. This view is also echoed by Daniels (2016) who indicated that mainstream media were hashtag takers during the *#feesmustfall* protest. Since the protest was trending on *Twitter*, some media companies resorted to reporting based on the *Twitter* hashtag (Bosch 2016; Daniels 2016). It is very common for the mainstream media to find themselves reporting on the news stories that have already been reported by the social movements on social media. However, this was not always the case with the previously disadvantaged movements in which their struggles were hardly reported on by the mainstream media. Although the mainstream media often used social media as a source of news, they also pushed their own agendas.

The emergence of connected social movements has not changed the attitude of mainstream media toward social movements. In cases where the mainstream media report the activities or events of social movements, the coverage tends to be negative, portraying them as irrelevant. The ideology of the mainstream media, which is an instrument of the elite, is counterposed to social movements. Bailey et al. (2008) believe that the mainstream media always has competing agendas that seem to triumph over social justice issues. The mainstream media is driven by a specific ideology or agenda that is not student-centric (Kalla 2020, interviewee). The students’ voices could not filter through to the mainstream media which is often underpinned by the dominant ideology. As a result, the student leaders often find themselves trying to correct what the mainstream media would have reported. As Kalla (2020) alluded, “we

*got coverage from various media sources, but the reporting was not always accurate.”* Apart from the incident where students flipped the car, for instance, there was a point in time when the Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand came down to address the *#feesmustfall* students. Without bothering to understand what was happening, various news media reported that the Principal was held hostage, which turned out to be false (IOL News 2015a). However, Adam Habib denied the allegations that he was held hostage (IOL News 2015b). This demonstrates the extent to which the mainstream media continues to wield the power to set the agenda.

### **Habib held hostage by students**



*161015 Wits university principal and Vice-chancellor Adam Habib speaks to student leaders during the students protest against a 10.5% fee increased. Picture:Paballo Thekiso*

Published Oct 17, 2015

Figure 5: Media reports that Adam Habib was held hostage (IOL News 2015a)

Due to these anomalies, social movements worldwide have embraced the power of social media as it enables them to report their own issues and set their own agenda. This statement is also supported by Kamp (2016) who believes that the opinions of the majority are now shaped by social media, something that was previously done by the mainstream media.

#### **5.2.6 Social media to challenge the mainstream media agenda**

Although the mainstream media are ideologically counterposed to social movements, there is a belief that the best way of fighting the dominant agenda is to penetrate the mainstream media spaces. Since social media has its limitations (discussed in Chapter 7), social movements continue to seek favourable coverage from the

mainstream media. The *LPM* activist indicated that they send their press releases to the bigger radio stations and newspapers because they often want bigger coverage that enables them to reach out to many people. Similar views were expressed by UPM activists.

*We sometimes request bigger stations to cover our activities. We sometimes write to the newspapers like Sowetan. Sometimes, journalists come to us from SABC. At times, we write to newspapers and we send to the media mine<sup>11</sup> which we have created. We created a media forum and that is how we send it to different media houses, but it is up to them to consider our stories or cases to be on their platforms (Soxujwa 2020, interviewee).*

This point on maintaining a symbiotic relationship with the mainstream media is also emphasised by Soxujwa (2020, interviewee), who indicated that “*we have our own people who are working in the media houses; they are helping us to publish our stories most of the time.*” Therefore, gaining media coverage is seen as an ultimate goal for social movements that want their discourses to challenge the dominant ideas.

Whilst social movements can challenge the hegemony by penetrating the media spaces, it is important to note that the decision to cover their stories is always the prerogative of the media houses. Thompson (2019) indicated that the content emanating from bourgeoisie media is biased since it merely reflects the opinions of the ruling class. *ABM* resorted to using their own *Facebook* page and website to post their own stories because the mainstream media<sup>12</sup> had rejected them.

*We use Facebook pages and the website of Abahlali because the mainstream media have rejected us. We issue a number of statements knowing very well that the mainstream media would not take us seriously; therefore, our Facebook platform and website will reach out to many communities (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

In some exceptional circumstances, mainstream media are pushed to take their stories because they would have been covered by alternative and online media. The point is that stories reach such a proportion on social media and other alternative media platforms that the mainstream media cannot ignore. For instance, the story of UPM,

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<sup>11</sup> A database which consist of the list of media houses.

<sup>12</sup>It was not specified what media houses rejected their stories or the type of message that was rejected.

which managed to win its case against Makhanda Municipality, was widely reported by various media houses.

On the other hand, the ABM also found the media to only cover them when they were involved in highly publicised cases such as the political killings in Kwazulu-Natal. Zikode's appearance at Moerane Commission which dealt with the political killings in KwaZulu-Natal also received wide coverage from mainstream media due to its magnitude.

*I remember when I personally appeared before the Moerane Commission which was setup to investigate the political killings here in KwaZulu-Natal. It is only when I appeared before the Commission that the mainstream media were somehow forced to take this matter up. Other cases were not taken seriously and we had to use alternative media and sometimes the whistle-blowers if people who should take them seriously had shown no interest (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

It is the prime objective of social movements to have the issues of the marginalised on the national agenda; however, the agenda-setting of the mainstream media always prioritises the issues they deem newsworthy. In this case, there is a growing discontent between the mainstream media and the social movements. The latter believe that their issues are not being prioritised by the mainstream media.

On the other hand, the *#feesmustfall* protest received large media coverage from the mainstream media. This issue was a trending topic on *Twitter*, hence it was very difficult for the media to ignore it. The magnitude of the *#feesmustfall* protest, which started at the University of Witwatersrand, attracted the attention of many media houses. According to Media Tenor Report cited in Bosch (2016), the *#feesmustfall* protest generated 1.3 million tweets in the last two weeks of October 2015. Techcentral (2015) also reported that the *#feesmustfall* hashtag was the most trending hashtag in 2015. As always, the media's coverage of protests is a regular occurrence because they are spectacular events. It is easy for the media to report on such spectacular and violent encounters. The *#feesmustfall* activist also acknowledged the fact that their movement received coverage from the mainstream media due to their privileged position.

*Wits and UCT had a particular privileged position in terms of media coverage and we*



*got coverage from various media sources (Kalla 2020).*

Undoubtedly, the previously disadvantaged universities that still grapple with many legacy issues such as the provision of water and electricity as well as safety and general service delivery constraints also had their fair share of protests and student activism. However, their efforts are sidelined by the mainstream media. Conversely, the former White liberal institutions like the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Wits) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) always receive coverage from the mainstream media because of their proximity to economic power. Many of the media hubs such as *SABC, Media24, ETV, PowerFM, Independent Newspapers, Mail & Guardian*, and *Caxton* are situated in Johannesburg or Cape Town. When protests break out at major and privileged institutions like Wits or UCT, it is easy for the media companies to dispatch reporters to cover the stories. However, the struggles of social movements such as *#feesmustfall* or *#Rhodesmustfall* were underplayed because they hardly dovetailed with the agenda of the mainstream media. The *#feesmusfall* activist notes that the coverage they received from mainstream media was not always accurate.

*They would not report what was actually going on. This is not to say there were no cases where some students were the first instigators of violent encounters. But overall, more students were peaceful and they were very restrained in what they would do because they knew that there could be adverse consequences and when altercations occurred, there was always a reason for that (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

The cartoon below illustrates some of the articles the students encountered in the mainstream media.

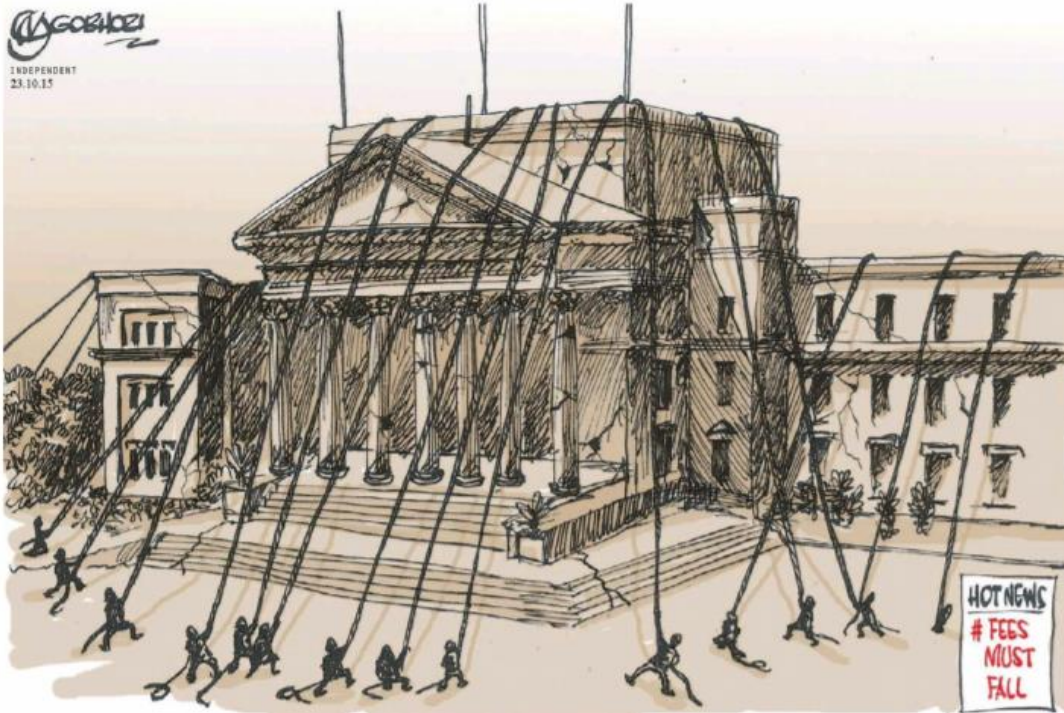


Figure 6: A cartoon portraying students as they were destroying the University building (Cape Times 2015)

It is common for media houses to portray such negative connotations toward the students' protests (see Figure 6). The literature detailing media reports on violence suggests that the media's coverage of such issues is mostly based on the spectacle (Nkuna 2016; Bailey et al. 2008; Bosch and Mutsvairo 2017; Radu, Morwe and Bird 2012; Bennet 2003). Because of the glaring nature of violence, the media is likely to focus on it. The media does not focus on the rationale behind the protest which, at its centre, was the rise of university fees and an untransformed university curriculum. Therefore, failure to acknowledge these concerns reduced the protest to a violent student body seeking to burn down the University.

The *#feesmustfall* protest was demonised by the media, giving the SAPS a clear justification to deploy police to arrest and shoot at students with rubber bullets. Nevertheless, this should not be suggestive of the absence of violence during the protest. Fanon's (1961) theory of violence professes that violence is often the only potent weapon that the oppressed have. Due to unequal power relations, violence is sometimes used as a reaction to counter the balance of power. Consequently, the media is likely to cover protests with violent elements, thereby bringing it to the

attention of the authorities. After all, any media coverage, whether good or bad, certainly brings the issues to the attention of authorities.

As a result of inaccurate coverage from the mainstream media, Kalla (2020, interviewee) adds that *“we could use alternative media sources to try and set the record straight because this media was a lot more sympathetic to our cause.”* This demonstrates the extent to which alternative media is used to challenge the mainstream media’s biases and inaccurate reporting which are often driven by ideological suppression. A study by Matsilele and Ruhanya (2021) also confirms that social media is a great platform for dissidents whose cause is consistently being rejected by the mainstream media.

Other social activists also identified a lack of time and resources as the reason behind the unexpansive coverage from the mainstream.

*There are times when we find that an issue has been overly simplified and therefore, we try to communicate the correct position as comprehensively as possible explaining the actual background and the context of the issue* (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee).

Due to limited timeslots on television or newspapers, for instance, the media cannot cover everything that is sent to them. In some cases, the newsrooms are getting smaller and only 20% of what they say gets published (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee). It is also difficult to find journalists who specialise in particular issues such as education. As a result, social media allows them to dedicate more time to expansive coverage.

### **5.2.7 Social media enables unmediated communication**

As indicated in Section 5.2.3, social media enables social movements to bypass the traditional media setup which is characterised by censorship. The key benefit thereof is the extent to which social media also allows social movements to have unmediated communication with their stakeholders. This contrasts sharply with the mainstream media where the message has to go through various gatekeepers.

*In social media, there is no mediation, anchor, host, or journalist. They get to speak for themselves. They say this and it gets posted and they have an immediate audience*

*for that content; so, that's what we really like about social media (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee).*

Similar sentiments were shared by the LPM activist who perceived the matter of unmediated communication as a key benefit of social media, thus:

*Social media helps people to communicate their messages across society due to various reasons. One of those reasons is that impoverished people are not taken seriously by the State and NGO sectors; so, it is only through social media that people are able to send their messages across society (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee).*

As a result, the social movements also reported experiencing effective feedback on social media. Owing to its interactivity, social media can allow feedback on whatever message that has been posted. The LPM activist also believed that social media is effective because it allows them to receive calls from people who would have received their messages. In this case, social media users realise that messages are easily accessible and at a high speed.

*Social media is highly accessible and cheap. It is effective because we do receive feedback from the people whom we communicate with, some of whom live as far away as Europe and other parts of Africa. It is highly effective and it is very easy for us to shout and they come back to us with feedback. We communicate matters, including funding, and we do receive feedback without waiting for so long (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee).*

As such, social media is seen as enabling unmediated communication between the advocates of the movement and its intended and unintended audiences. This is consistent with the social constructivist view, which shows that society always finds new meaning in this new media technology.

### **5.3 Discussion and reflections**

This chapter speaks to the role that social media plays in representing alternative formations. The findings reveal that various social movements embrace the power of social media in disseminating their messages to their stakeholders. The Network Society Theory, which speaks to the extent to which the network plays an important role in social, political and economic spheres of life, was applied. The relevance of network society to this study is linked to how social media is becoming too dominant

in organising communication relationships within social movements.

The interviews conducted with activists demonstrated that social media allowed social movements to bypass the power structures, send communication instantly, become creative, set the record straight, become the source of news and challenge the agenda of the mainstream media. This situation is also emphasised by the Network Society Theory which seems to pave the way for the world, which is grappling with new technologies. The Network Society Theory also posits that the new media is an environment that encompasses all the spheres of human life (Castells 2004). As indicated in Chapter 3 of this study, the theoretical underpinnings of network society have deliberated on the endless possibilities offered by new media in the digital age. Seminal authors, such as Castells (1998), predicted that the network society would dominate all spheres of human life. Castells' (2012) book titled *Network of Hope and Outrage* explores the new forms of social movement and the extent to which they organise their activities on the internet and wireless communications. His theoretical conceptualisations purported that the traditional mode of communication will be replaced by the digital modes of communication. In another study, Atton (2002a) also noted some success stories detailing the migration from a traditional print newsletter to an electronic newsletter owned and controlled by various formerly oppressed groups. While it is true that the digital mode of mobilisation acts as an alternative to traditional models, the shift is occurring at a snail's pace. The worst-case scenario is that the developing countries are always the late absorbers of the new technologies.

It is critical to highlight that the Network Society Theory has been criticised for its technological determinist view. Social constructivism is also discussed to neutralise the technological determinist view of the Network Society Theory. The social constructivist takes into consideration the social structures in which the new technology manifests. Within the South African context, which is a developing country, the digital divide remains a challenge. The divide manifests because the new technology cannot be separated from society which is characterised by huge inequality.

However, the result revealed that social movements have embraced the power of social media despite the digital divide. Big and small social movements have since

embraced the various types of social media platforms. Zikode (2020, interviewee) argues that “*we need to advance with it so that it does not work against us.*” The social movements also want to be part of the 4IR, which has brought a wholesale change into the communication process. For social movements to embrace social media, they should find a way of advancing their social standing and visibility. The social movement also selects specific social media platforms that will help them advance their cause. For instance, the *#feesmustfall* movement selected *Twitter* because many students were on *Twitter*. Bosch (2016: 2017a) has demonstrated that the students used *Twitter* for radical citizenship and to voice their Black pain. Other social movements, such as ABM, LPM, and UPM prefer to use *Facebook* because that is where they find their support base. Apart from being part of the global trend, there are various reasons that make it necessary for social movements to use social media.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has looked into the various strategies and tactics that social movements use to communicate on social media. The chapter responded to the first research sub-question which sought to understand the opportunities that social movements derive from using social media as their alternative media. Emerging evidence indicates that social media can benefit social movements in a variety of ways. The evidence indicates that social movements use social media to bypass bureaucracy, have unmediated communication, challenge the dominant narrative, challenge the mainstream media agenda, and become a source of information for the media. This evidence is also emphasised by the Network Society Theory, which identifies the endless possibilities offered by social media. The social construction approach was advanced in order to understand the multifaceted approach to social media.

Whilst social media presents hope for social movements, the study also revealed the various challenges that may hamper social media's ability to become a trusted alternative medium. The next chapter indicates that whilst the social movement can reap a variety of benefits by using social media to communicate their discourses, social media on its own is not a panacea to their communication needs. The next chapters zoom into how social movements use social media to advance their communication agendas. The next chapter presents an analysis of social media pages belonging to selected social movements in an attempt to reveal the usage patterns of

social media.

## CHAPTER SIX: THE DIGITAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT: INTERROGATING THE POTENTIAL OF *FACEBOOK* AND *TWITTER* WITHIN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter unearthed and discussed the reason behind the adoption of social media by social movements. This chapter delves into the practices of social movements on social media. This chapter conducts a close reading of the texts of social movements on social media in an attempt to determine the extent to which they engage in alternative reporting. In so doing, the chapter responds to the second research sub-question, which sought to determine the extent to which social media accelerates alternative voices. Since the introduction of social media, there has been extreme euphoria about the potential of social media to become an impeccable alternative platform. Such discourses emanated during the Arab Spring protest in Egypt and the *#feesmustfall* protest in South Africa. Many social media analysts envisioned a new era in which social media will instigate a revolution. Many social movements across the globe have adopted social media in their communication mix. The presence of social movements on social media is undoubtedly a noticeable force. The following section looks into the communication practices of the selected social movements and the extent to which they represent the ideal alternative media. This will be made possible through the extrapolation of social media data extracted from *Twitter* accounts and *Facebook* pages of the selected social movements. The discussion also focuses on how the social movements tell their stories on social media, the social media engagements, and how such practices can be considered alternative reporting.

### 6.2 Social movements in the digital age

In responding to why and how social movements use social media, this section succinctly presents the data that emerged during the interviews and social media analysis. All the interviewed social movement activists highlighted that they used social media to tell their stories. However, the usage of social media differs from one social movement to the next because social movements are structured, organised, and funded differently. As indicated in the previous chapter, the evidence also shows that youth-based social movements tend to be very active on social media. This is also supported by statistical evidence which shows that the youth aged between 25 and 34



years are more active on social media (Statista 2021) than other age groups.

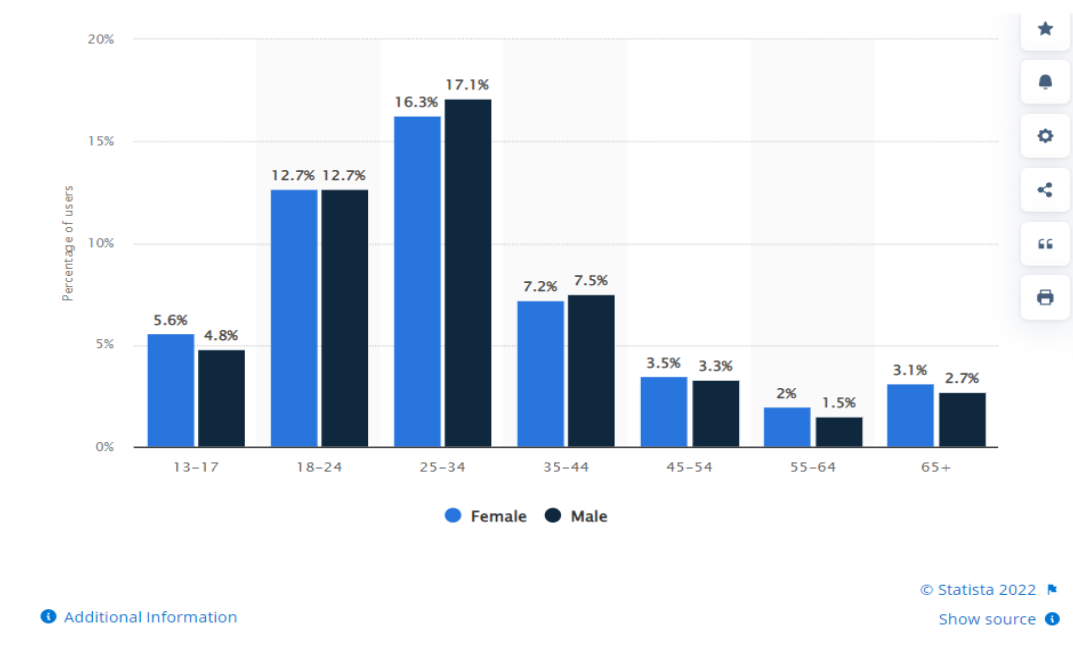


Figure 7: The distribution of social media users in South Africa as of January 2021 by age group and gender (Statista 2021)

There is a plethora of reasons explaining why social movements have appropriated social media to tell their stories and communicate their concerns. The previous chapter has already addressed some of the issues that drive social movements to adopt social media as alternative media. The key reason is that the mainstream media has failed to prioritise the concerns of these social movements in their coverage. In cases where the mainstream media covers the stories from social movements, the coverage tends to be deficit-based or negative, deliberately portraying them as perpetrators of hooliganism and violence. Therefore, social movements have seen social media as a space where they can tell their own stories and challenge the popular narrative dominating the mainstream media.

### 6.3 Hashtag activism

The evidence suggests that *Twitter* effectively reinforces alternative discourses through hashtag activism, often called hashtivism or slacktivism. Evidence from movements such as Arab Springs and Occupy Wall Street protests also shows that *Twitter* has the potential to capture its audiences (Castells 2012; Gerbaudo 2012;

Auragh and Alexander 2011; Bardici 2012). In South Africa, the *#feesmustfall* movement has used hashtag activism to capture the attention of the nation as university students struggled against high university fees and untransformed university curricula.

The youth who were activists in the *#feesmustfall* and *#Rhodesmustfall* movements proved that social media can be used meaningfully to challenge the dominant power systems. These movements employed *Twitter* hashtag activism to voice their discontent with regard to the high university fees, the persistent display of racial symbols that encapsulate White dominance in post-apartheid South Africa and the continuous implementation of the colonial curriculum. These movements, also known as the Fallist Movements, have been effective in using *Twitter* to tell their stories and to solicit sympathy from South Africans and the rest of the world. The *#feesmustfall* movement, for instance, adopted *Twitter* because they had many followers on *Twitter* who spanned various universities (Kalla 2020). They used their *Twitter* account titled Wits SRC to communicate with the students via direct messages, tweets, infographics, and hashtags. The hashtag *#feesmustfall* became one of the most trending topics on *Twitter* in 2015 (TechCentral 2015; Media Monitoring Africa, cited in Bosch 2016). The success of the *#feesmustfall* movement lay in the unity between different students' structures which allowed students to support the movement regardless of their differences. Apparently, social movements in the digital age can hugely impact communication and power systems if the activists work together and speak with a united voice. However, there were instances when scuffles occurred within the *#feesmustfall* movement (Kalla 2020, interviewee). For instance, after the announcement of the zero fees increase by President Zuma (now former President), some student's started demanding free education, which caused divisions that resulted in the movement being short-lived.

Many social movements in South Africa do not make a significant impact on social media because they are very small and divided along geographical and political lines, as well as other intersectionalities. However, the *#feesmustfall* movement embraced unity across the various spectrums of South African society and used the power of social media to challenge the status quo. Consequently, the *#feesmustfall* hashtag became one of the most trending hashtags in 2015 (TechCentral 2015). Before then,

students had used the hashtag during the *#Rhodesmustfall* protests which happened earlier in 2015.

The top five news-related hashtags of 2015 were:

1. *#FeesMustFall*
2. *#SONA2015*
3. *#NationalShutdown*
4. *#AskMmusi*
5. *#Loadshedding*

Source: TechCentral 2015

To establish the extent to which students used social media for alternative reporting, the researcher analysed participants' activities under the hashtag *#feesmustfall*. The period of analysis was one-month, spanning from 12 October 2015 to 12 November 2015. Unfortunately, the main *Twitter* account of Wits SRC was deleted during the handover of power from Progressive Youth Alliance (PYA) to Economic Freedom Fighters Student Command (EFFSC) (Kalla 2020, interviewee). Thus, the analysis focuses specifically on the activities that happened under the hashtag *#feesmustfall*. The students took to *Twitter* on 12 October 2015 to voice their concerns regarding the 10.5% fee increase that was proposed by the University of Witwatersrand. The initial hashtag, *#WitsFeesMustFall*, was put into effect on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2015 but was replaced with *#feesmustfall* on the following day. One participant said:

*We tried various hashtags from the beginning when we got the message through our social media accounts and the one that people responded to the most was #Witsfeesmustfall. When it became a national thing, we dropped the Wits part of the hashtag and just used #feesmustfall* (Kalla 2020, interviewee).

This demonstrates that a lot of planning occurred to get the hashtag trending. Rather than claiming that the protest was driven by *Twitter*, it is important to acknowledge the role played by activists in coordinating the *#feesmustfall* movement. The *#feesmustfall* resonated very well with students from other universities as they were experiencing the same issues. The results of social media analysis indicate that many students around the country started sending solidarity messages under the *#feesmustfall* hashtag. This led to what was referred to as the biggest protest in post-apartheid South

Africa.

Many students used *Twitter* to voice their frustration over the high university fees and the untransformed university curriculum. The hashtag started trending on 13 October 2020 in anticipation of the biggest strike that was scheduled to take place at the University of Witwatersrand. During the first few days of the hashtag, the students were tweeting and re-tweeting amongst themselves. Many other people were sharing the images and videos of the protest on *Twitter*. The most prominent *Twitter* users were students themselves and *Twitter* accounts belonging to student groupings such as student-led political organisations and residence committees. Though the students were speaking with the same voice, their level of engagement<sup>13</sup> amongst the tweets was very low. It appears as if the students were tweeting in their own corner. Even though the hashtag was on the trend list for several days, the students' accounts of what was happening were not elaborate.

### **6.3.1 The element of alternative reporting**

Kwak et al. (2010) also indicated that it is common knowledge that many people use *Twitter* to get news or specific information about a specific event. In addition, there are instances when social media has promoted ordinary members who report on a specific event to be well-known (Kwak et al. 2010). Since the *#feesmustfall* movement became the most influential hashtag in 2015, the activists also became overnight personalities partly due to the exposure they received from social media and thereafter, the mainstream media.

As much as the *#feesmustfall* hashtag was most popular and was used extensively by students, the element of alternative media reporting was lacking within it. The journalistic framework of 5Ws and H (who, what, when, where, why and how) were not fulfilled. Many people seemingly used the hashtag to tweet their solidarity message rather than reporting on what was happening on the scene. The objective was to get more people talking about the *#feesmustfall* than to report on what was happening. The tweets indicated below provide a brief synopsis of what had been appearing under the hashtag.

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<sup>13</sup> Engagement is based on the number of likes, comments and retweets.



Although social media presents great potential for social movements to report their news and set the record straight, the tweets shown above demonstrate that many people were not using social media for reporting purposes but for sending solidarity messages. Bosch (2016) also found that parents and academics also used *Twitter* to send solidarity messages. Nevertheless, the use of hashtag activism has attracted the attention of the mainstream and alternative media. In this case, the mainstream media collected stories from their *Twitter* feeds. Daniels (2016) confirms that the mainstream media were hashtag takers during the *#feesmustfall* protest.

The extent to which the activities of the activists on *Twitter* can be called alternative reporting is still a subject of intense academic debate. A study conducted by Poell and Borra (2011) concluded that social media does not represent alternative reporting because very few people were reportedly participating in crowdsourcing. This conclusion is particularly valid because many types of engagements that happen on *Twitter* cannot be characterised as news reporting. In addition, Moyo (2007) indicated that social media lacks credibility because it does not have the editorial lines that are

found in professional newsrooms. As a microblogging platform, *Twitter* is particularly used to share opinions, beliefs, and feelings. The study found that the basic principles of reporting an event were not followed and this represents a lost opportunity. As such, there is a need to instil essential reporting skills in the users so that their reporting can complement or challenge mainstream media reporting.

### 6.3.2 Expropriation of #feesmustfall hashtag

The #feesmustfall hashtag also attracted the interest of many social media influencers such as politicians and celebrities. Therefore, the most influential members of society also joined the bandwagon in supporting the students' activism on *Twitter*. This phenomenon diverted the attention of *Twitter* users from the students to celebrities and politicians who were not part of the protest. It is the nature of social media that those who have more followers appear to have a bigger voice than those with fewer followers. Whilst many activists were busy protesting, politicians like Julius Malema, who had 3.2 million followers at the time of writing, also joined the hashtag bandwagon.



**Julius Sello Malema**  @Julius\_S\_Malema · Oct 21, 2015

...

I'm the happiest man today, very proud of all student who are taking on the authorities. you learned from the best, [#FeesMustFall](#)

 76

 825

 405



**Lindiwe Mazibuko**  @LindiMazibuko · Oct 20, 2015

...


There are moments in history when we who profess to leadership must take a moment & listen as our young people take the lead. [#FeesMustFall](#)

 32

 556

 317



**Floyd Shivambu**  @FloydShivambu · Oct 23, 2015

...

The first battle of 0% fees is won! Now the focus must be on [#FreeEducation](#) for all! No surrender! No retreat! [#FeesMustFall](#)

 61

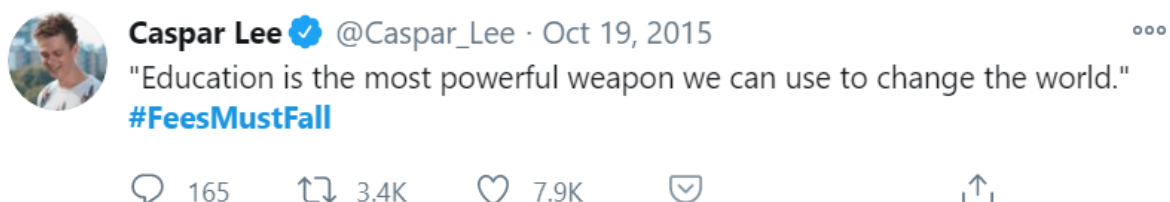
 419

 174





The tweets cited above indicate that Julius Malema's tweet was liked by 405 users and was re-tweeted 825 times. Lindiwe Mazibuko, Floyd Shivambu, and Bantu Holomisa were among the politicians who received hundreds of reactions to their tweets. On the other hand, it was impossible to come across a tweet with comparable reactions from students who were part of the activism. Many other politicians who participated in the hashtag received more engagement due to their active political standings and popularity. The most popular individuals always received more engagement from their sympathisers even if they did not Tweet anything substantial. This phenomenon is also supported by the literature which attests to the fact that social media amplifies the dominant voices at the expense of the less dominant ones (Fuchs 2017; Fenton 2012; Curran 2012; Herman and Chomsky 2008). Fenton (2017) adds that 10% of *Twitter* users generate 90% of the content. These imbalances were also reflected during the *#feesmustfall* protest, with politicians and other social media influencers appropriating a bigger voice than the student activists.





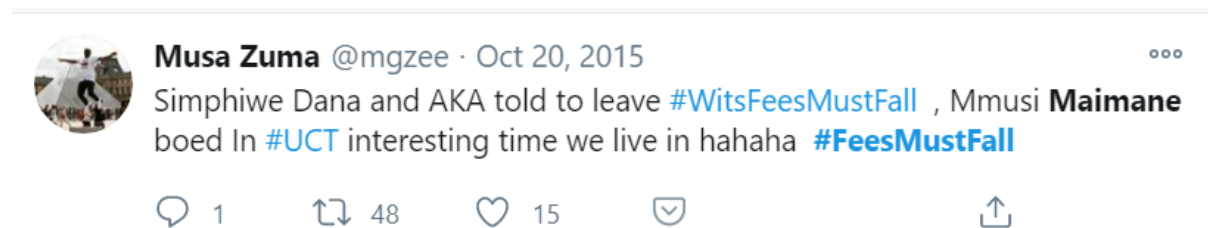
The tweets cited above indicate that the celebrities also joined the bandwagon. Celebrities always Tweet about the most popular topics to gain more followers, get publicity, solidify their fame and show sympathy for social justice issues. Whilst this may appear as support for a genuine cause, celebrities normally do this for their own interest. Celebrities with more followers are highly sought after by brands that seek to advertise or endorse their products on their profiles. In this way, the brands will reach out to a big audience. In most cases, these social media influencers come on top during searches and hashtags. The *Twitter* algorithm normally prioritises tweets from those users with more followers, more comments, likes, or re-tweets. This algorithm does not take into consideration whether the influencers are posting critical content or not. The users with fewer followers such as students who were affected the most about the issues of fees deleted 'the' just before 'law're more likely to be at the bottom of the hashtag results. This demonstrates the extent to which social media is geared towards populism rather than alternative discourses that have the potential to challenge the hegemony.

In addition, the mainstream news media and journalists also appeared to be more prominent because they had more followers than the students. In this case, the tweets from student activists were overshadowed by the tweets from the mainstream media,



politicians, celebrities, and social media influencers who were outside observers. When hashtags are dominated by individuals who are not part of the activism, the reason behind the activism is likely to be distorted. The mainstream media that portrayed the students as violent was more likely to set the agenda due to its bigger footprint (as seen in Figure 5, the media reported that Adam Habib was held hostage which, turned out to be incorrect).

Whilst it became clear that celebrities and politicians were capitalising on the pain of students to advance their own agenda, the *#feesmustfall* movement started rejecting celebrities and politicians. For instance, well-known individuals like *AKA*, *Simphiwe Dana*, and *Musi Maimane* decided to join the movement at UCT and Wits respectively, but the students did not welcome them. The students felt that politicians politicised the *#feesmustfall* movement, thus causing divisions within the students who converged along non-partisan lines. The celebrities on the other hand, were using the *#feesmustfall* movement as a vehicle for fame and publicity. In this case, the involvement of celebrities and politicians would have diverted the attention of social media and news media from the students to politicians and celebrities.



This scenario is in stark contrast with other social movements, such as ABM, LPM and UPM, that never trended on social media. Celebrities and politicians do not lend their support to non-trending social movements. Some of these social media influencers are ambassadors of popular brands that hardly associate themselves with what they may perceive as rogue movements.

### 6.3.3 Speaking with one voice

Based on *Twitter's* analysis of *#feesmusfall*, there were some elements of live reporting comprising images and videos of students who evidently wanted to break the news during the protest. However, as a lot of students were tweeting about the event, the reporting was largely clumsy, random and not collaborative. Apparently, the

hashtag was a great way of following the debates rather than reporting the events. Many of the tweets under the hashtag were speaking with one voice at the beginning of the protest when the movement was still emerging. The goals were clear; the students wanted a zero fee increase. As the protest grew bigger, cracks started to emerge. As Chiumbu (2012) indicated, the lack of coordination threatened the social movements in spite of fighting for the same course. Even after President Zuma had announced the zero per cent increase in university fees, some students' grouping expressed dissatisfaction. Kalla (2020, interviewee) recalls a situation when their bus was prevented from leaving the protest at Union Buildings because some students from other universities such as TUT were not satisfied with the outcome of the protest because they wanted free education.

#### **6.4 The *Facebook* effect**

Other social movements, such as *ABM*, *LPM*, *EE*, and *UPM* are highly present on *Facebook*. However, the use of *Facebook* differs from one social movement to the other. The study analysed the *Facebook* page of each movement for six months (from 15 September 2019 to 15 March 2020). This analysis was done to ascertain the frequency of posts, the style of reporting, and social media engagement (reactions, comments, and shares).

##### **6.4.1 Presence of *Abahlali* on Social Media**

*ABM* established its presence on *Facebook* where the activists regularly post and tell their stories. The movement also has a website where the activists post press releases and publish their activities. This portrays the movement as having embraced new media as an alternative space where its activist tell their stories. However, the movement does not have a *Twitter* page, but there are sympathisers and news reports that mention its name on *Twitter*. *ABM* had 7878 followers on *Facebook* (April 2021). Over a period of six months, *Abahlali* posted 139 statuses, which translates to almost 0.9 statuses per day. *ABM* use *Facebook* regularly to raise issues and concerns relating to the conditions of shack dwellers and the landless. The type of reporting they engage in includes sharing different kinds of texts, images, videos, press releases, news links, posters, and speeches. Around 99%<sup>14</sup> of their posts included texts written

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<sup>14</sup> The analysis looked into the total number of statuses posted within the period of analysis and ascertain how many statuses contained text, photos, videos, and links to other websites.

in English since it is an organisation that has a local and international appeal. As a social movement that represents shack dwellers, *ABM* uses its *Facebook* page to counter the hegemonic status quo that is characterised by inequalities in the allocation of resources. In opposing the hegemony, their *Facebook* page is populated by stories relating to evictions, police brutality and various suffering that its constituency endures.

Moyo (2014: 275) believes that “photojournalism is a citizen’s journalism’s most dominant mode of telling stories.” The *ABM* also used images to express themselves. During the analysis period, 59% of *Abahlali’s Facebook* statuses included images. In most cases, one post would also include multiple images. The analysis shows that 681 photos were posted during the period of analysis. Most of the images were portrayals of evictions, police brutality, branch launches, meetings, and other events that were held. *Abahlali’s* reliance on images implies that a lot of activities were happening on the ground. The images also appear to generate more engagement than text-based statuses.

Apart from the texts and images, around 18% of the statuses included news links. When *ABM* received coverage from one of the established news media, they would re-share that report with their followers. In addition to re-sharing the stories, *ABM* also added some text to thank the newspaper or the reporter for extending their coverage. During a period of six months, they received coverage from the following news media in order of their popularity: *New Frame* (6 reports), *Peoples Dispatch* (4), *IOL News* (3), *GroudUP* (2), *The Tri-Continental* (2), *Daily Maverick* (1), *Berea Mail* (1), *Mail & Guardian* (1), *EWN*(1), and the *Tembisan* (1) and news clip from *Isolezwe* (1). It is not surprising that the *News Frame*, which describes itself as a non-profit publication that pursues social justice, has emerged as one of the publications that extensively cover the activities of *ABM*. This publication is ideologically aligned with the social movements in the sense that they are non-hegemonic. However, this does not represent all the online coverages they received during the period of analysis, but just a number of news links that were shared on the *ABM Facebook* page. One should also be cognisant of the fact that clips from television and radio may not be easily shared on social media. Although sharing is not tantamount to endorsement, the analysis of the text captions that accompanied the *Facebook* statuses suggests that the shared news links were endorsed. Although *ABM* shared many links from the

different websites of the news sources, the links from their own website were hardly shared. This is a lost opportunity because the website is one of the instruments that can be used to share comprehensive stories. ABM website contains many comprehensive reports that its followers, researchers, journalists and authorities can find useful.

In South Africa, ABM was found to be unique. There have been many movements in SA, but the thing that made ABM so amazing was our website and press statements. Journalists and academics could always raid this website for juicy quotes. "Speak to us, Not about us", "No Land, No House, No Vote", "A Living Politics". For the journalist and foreign student, ABM was a useful thing to exist because it said things relevant to the budget, Marikana, the Occupy movement, Mandela, neoliberalism, xenophobia, the World Cup, Zuma, or even the Comrades Marathon (Mdlalose 2014: 345).

It is important to note that *Facebook* can be used to drive internet traffic to their website which is archive of memories.

In addition, during the period of analysis, 12% of the statuses contained videos. Just like the photos, most videos depicted evictions, police brutality, branch launches, meetings, and other events that were held by *ABM*. *ABM* also issued several press releases (9%) during the period of analysis. Most of the news links that were shared also followed the pattern of the news releases. Subsequent to the press release, various media groups, such as those listed in the previous paragraph, would cover their stories. Stories covered by online media sites or newspapers would then be shared on their *Facebook* to get them trending; the least items to be posted included speeches and posters at 1% each.

As much as *ABM* has been using *Facebook* as their alternative media platform to tell their stories to almost 8000 followers and the public, the levels of engagement were a bit lower than anticipated. Although some of the statuses were publicly shared and re-shared by their members, it was rare to find a status that went viral and reached out to many followers. On average, the *Facebook* status of *ABM* would have around 39 reactions, seven comments, and around six shares. That equals an average of 52 engagements per status<sup>15</sup>. The *Facebook* status that received the most reactions was

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<sup>15</sup> Engagement rates take into consideration the number of comments, reactions and sharing.

the announcement of death of Pretty, one of *Abahlali baseMjondolo* activists, in November 2019. The status received 110 reactions, 43 comments, and 14 shares. However, that is a low level of engagement, considering the number of followers they had on *Facebook*. Chapter 7 discusses in-depth the extent to which *Facebook* marginalises social movements through the use of algorithms, machine learning and artificial intelligence. The practice of boosting posts appears to be the only way in which social movements reach many people, thus allowing them to have more engagements, though this comes at a cost.

#### **6.4.2 Presence of Equal Education on Social Media**

Equal Education (EE) managed to embrace various social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *WhatsApp*, and *YouTube*. In terms of *Facebook* users, EE had the largest following on social media, with 101148 followers. Over the six-month period, EE posted 73 statuses. EE used *Facebook* regularly to communicate their issues and concerns. The type of reporting that they engaged in included texts, images, videos, infographics, press releases, news links, posters, and re-sharing statuses from their own account or other *Facebook* accounts. Just like *ABM*, 99% of EE statuses consisted of text written in English. As indicated before, text appears to be the most dominant feature on both *Twitter* and *Facebook*. As a social movement that fights for better education in public schools, EE's *Facebook* page is used to counter the hegemonic status quo, which is characterised by unequal allocation of resources. In opposing the hegemony, EE's *Facebook* page is populated by stories relating to the lack of resources in schools, poor education, and the various forms of suffering that learners endure at public schools.

EE also embraced convergence because most of their statuses contained text, images, videos or infographics and links. Around 29% of their posts included images. Unlike *ABM*, who normally posted multiple images without filtering, the admin of EE normally selected one image to tell the story. Throughout the analysis period, 41 images were posted on their *Facebook* statuses. Most of the posted photos portrayed school learners, protesters, workshops, meetings, leadership sessions, and other events that were held. As indicated in previous sections, images tended to generate greater engagement than text-based statuses.

Around 21% of the statuses included news links. As is the case with ABM, when EE received coverage from one of the established new media such as *Daily Maverick*, *TimesLive*, *Mail & Guardian* or *IOL News*, they would share that report with their followers. In addition to sharing their stories, EE also quoted the article and encouraged their members to read such articles. During the six months, EE received coverage from the following news media in order of popularity: *Daily Maverick* (3), *TimesLive* (3), *Mail & Guardian* (2), *IOL News* (1), *SABC News* (1), *Corruption Watch* (1), *702 Talk* (1), *Salaa Media* (1), and *The Citizen* (1). According to Jansen-Thomas (2020, interviewee) the *Daily Maverick* stands out as the champion of the poor, as it gives marginalised people the space to communicate their experiences. As indicated in the previous section, this does not represent the sum total of the entire online coverage they received during the period of analysis, but just a number of news links that were shared on EE's *Facebook* page. EE also claims that they received coverage from various sources, such as community radio and newspapers. A great deal of that coverage could not be easily shared on *Facebook* because they did not subscribe to media monitoring companies to keep track of what was happening on various media platforms. Jansen-Thomas (2020, interviewee) indicated that “we do not have a paid media monitoring tool or paid media monitoring software because those are really expensive.” Although sharing is not tantamount to endorsement, the analysis of the text captions from the said status suggests that the shared news links were highly recommended by the social movement. It is also a public relations nightmare to share a negative story without indicating its ramifications and giving the correct account of what really happened.

Apart from the links from external news links, EE also attached links from their own website. When issuing press releases, demands, or job adverts, the EE would also attach a link from their website. The analysis indicates that 21% of its *Facebook* status consisted of links from its own website. This drives internet traffic from the various social media platforms they use to their website. EE also re-shared several statuses from their own *Facebook* page or other *Facebook* pages of similar importance. Around 8% of statuses were re-shared from their *Facebook* page to remind their followers about the impending job advertisements or marches. On the other side, around 5% of the statuses that were shared were sourced from other pages dealing with matters that they had endorsed. Normally, these are NGOs or organisations within the social

justice sector.

In addition, EE also issued several press releases during the period of analysis. The statuses containing a press release constituted 12% during the period of analysis. There was often a thin line between a press release, an announcement, and a letter of demand directed to the Department of Education. However, all of these reports can be considered press releases because of the extensive details embedded within such a report. The statuses containing a video constituted eight per cent (8%) of the reports during the period of analysis, and just like the photos, many of their videos portrayed school learners, protests, workshops, meetings, leadership sessions, and other events.

Furthermore, just like the *#feesmustfall*, the EE also used infographics. The infographics make the content easier to understand because they use attractive colours, visual cues, and graphics which makes it easy for users to decode the message. About eight per cent (8%) of the posts consisted of infographics relating to their educational campaigns and budget speech analysis and the least items to be posted included letters and *WhatsApp* links. Approximately four per cent (4%) of the statuses had letters written by learners expressing various complaints about the quality of education and the deplorable state of educational infrastructure. EE is a learner-centred movement which entails that the views of learners take precedence in all aspects of their operation.

As much as the EE has used *Facebook* as their alternative platform to communicate to nearly 101148 followers and the public, the level of engagement remained low. This is not surprising because the NGO sector always received a small share of engagement on *Facebook* (See Figure 9 for more details). The social movement sector involves a constituency that is excluded from the digital world due to the high cost of data and various forms of the digital divide (see Chapter 7 for a detailed discussion of the digital divide). An analysis of some of their engagements on *Facebook* suggests low engagement, considering the number of people following the page and those sharing the post on their walls. On average, their *Facebook* statuses received around 45 reactions, four comments, and 12 shares. That equals an average of 60 engagements per status.

The average engagement would have been lower had it not been for the two statuses that seemed to have gone viral. It is always possible for some statuses to go viral when influential members of society share them on their *Facebook* walls. The status that received the highest number of reactions was updated in December 2019 when the EE *Facebook* page listed all the major achievements of that year with the title “Year in Review.” The status yielded 1074 reactions, seven comments, and 11 people shared. The status that received the second highest reaction was updated in January 2020. The status was about the rate of school dropout which they wrote was a cause of concern. The above-average number of engagements suggests that the status may have been boosted. Boosting involves the user of *Facebook* paying a specific amount of money in order to reach out to a specific number of audiences. An interview conducted with Jansen-Thomas (2020, interviewee) also indicated that EE often boosted their *Facebook* statuses because *Facebook* pages are often marginalised by the *Facebook* algorithm. The practice of boosting the post appears to be the only way in which social movements can reach more engagements, though this comes at a cost. Many social movements rely on donations and the goodwill of their members in terms of sharing their stories. It is not always possible for a social movement to boost every post as the corporate world does.

#### **6.4.3 The People’s Movement**

The *UPM* does not have a traditional *Facebook* page but a *Facebook* group; the former is different from the latter in the sense that any person who joined the group can post under the same group. Furthermore, the admin of a *Facebook* group is responsible for either approving or rejecting stories that are posted on the *Facebook* group. The admin is also responsible for admitting and rejecting members wishing to join the group. The *Facebook* group of the *Unemployed People’s Movement* had 2361 members. One good thing about the *Facebook* group is that anyone can post their own status, but the status has to be approved by the group admin. During the period of analysis, various statuses were posted. A handful of statuses were posted by Chairperson – Ayanda Kota and the Secretary-General - Sikhumbuzo Soxujwa. The posts mostly included invitations to specific meetings. During the interview, Soxujwa (2020, interviewee) indicated that they did not share everything on *Facebook* because their enemies could know what they were planning. They would rather call face-to-face meetings.



*If you are planning something big that is likely to change the situation of our people; we cannot plan it on social media. As I have said before, people that are often linked to our route to emancipation are there on social media and some of them are the creators of these social media platforms. It is not safe for us to have concrete or meaningful things that are likely to change the situation of our people on social media. However, we do use social media to communicate at some point and to reach out to one another (Soxujwa 2020 interviewee).*

Although, the *Landless People's Movement* also has a *Facebook* page with 1239 followers, the *LPM* did not post anything on their *Facebook* page during the six months of review (15 September 2019 – 15 March 2020). This situation demonstrates that the *Unemployed People's Movement* and *Landless People's Movement* have not seized the opportunity to use social media to tell their own stories.

## **6.5. Discussions and reflections**

This chapter has revealed the findings that demonstrate that social movements use social media not only to tell their stories but to fulfil various communication needs as well. In this case, various social movements use social media to a specific degree depending on the availability of resources such as financial and human resources. The chapter also revealed that social movements use social media for alternative reporting to a limited extent. However, social movements stand to benefit if they use social media to engage in alternative reporting because the mainstream media always fail to prioritise issues related to social justice.

The previous chapter has demonstrated that social media represents the best alternative media for social movements in the digital age. As the proponents of the Network Society Theory have indicated, the capabilities of social media are unimaginable. Social media have the power to transcend boundaries and bring people together. This is true for social media like *Twitter* and *Facebook*, which continue to connect billions of users online. However, the success of social movements on social media is not always apparent. Data suggest that social movements use social media differently depending on their needs. Whilst some movements are very active on social media, others remain frail. It is also important to note that a successful social media campaign requires human resources, financial resources, unity, coordinated efforts,

and active followers. The fact that the success of technologies is dependent upon how a particular grouping expropriates the technology suggests that technology is socially constructed. The results from social media analysis reveal various levels of technology usage by various movements.

Various studies have been conducted to determine the effective use of hashtag activism during the *#feesmustfall* and *#Rhodesmustfall* protests (Bosch 2016, 2017; Daniels 2016; Mutsvairo and Bosch 2017). Bosch (2016) believes that social media have given the students the platform to play an active role in participatory citizenship. The students used hashtags on *Twitter* to attract the attention of the management of universities and the various spheres of government. The *#feesmustfall* protest epitomises the prime example of how *Twitter* crowdsourcing can be used to challenge the existing power structure. The movement became too popular to be ignored. Daniels (2016) believes that the Fallist movements have resulted in social changes, particularly the announcement of a zero per cent fee increase. Social media, in this case, represents a new public sphere where common ideas are discussed. The relevance of the Public Sphere Theory stems from the fact that social media allows members of society to participate in the public sphere.

As is the case with the *#feesmustfall* movement, multitudes of students were using *Twitter* hashtags to disseminate information and express their concerns. Notably, students were better positioned to use social media because they had access to Wi-Fi and computers on the university campus. The findings reveal that students are also used to writing, texting, and tweeting because they are digital natives. These factors also contributed to the movement's resounding success. As the protest grew bigger, a lot of disjunctures started to emerge, with some of them being driven by political motives that started to infiltrate the movement. As such, there were lots of binaries that made some activists backtrack as others started making extreme demands. On the other hand, the hashtags also enabled everyone to have a view of the protest. Whilst the extent to which social media allow everyone to share their ideas, this, on its own, made the space to be overwhelmed by competing ideas, opinions, and beliefs. Although having a diversity of ideas is not a diabolical thing for democracy, developing a consensus on social media spaces is a tremendous task for social movement activists. The age of social media is known to accelerate the concept of individualism

(Curran 2012, Fenton and Barrasi 2011). Social movements, such as the *#feesmustfall* movement, experienced a huge challenge that relates to a lack of central command.

As a result of a lack of coordination on social media, some social media influencers, politicians, celebrities and spies are inclined to expropriate hashtag activism in an attempt to amplify their support, increase their followers and, in some cases, cause division amongst the activists. Bosch (2017a) found that influential radio or media personalities like Gareth Cliff and Eusebius McKaiser dominated group clusters within the *#Rhodesmustfall* hashtag. The E-News' *Twitter* page was also found to be at the centre of *Twitter* clusters. Therefore, social media places its popular users, such as celebrities and influencers at the centre of the *Twitter* sphere. This resonates with Fuchs' (2014a) findings, which indicated that the online world tends to privilege big media groups with financial resources. The mainstream social media pages belonging to *CNN*, *BBC*, *New York Times*, and *Daily Mail* tend to dominate the social media spaces. This displays some of the unequal power relations existing on social media. The fact that social media thrives when there is an unequal power relationship is expounded in greater depth by the Critical Political Economy Theory, the Theory of Subalternity and the elite Public Sphere Theory.

Although social media has given the social movement activists extra mileage to speak the truth to power, dealing with social media rumours, fake news and misinformation complicated their campaigns on social media (Kalla 2020, interviewee). This has always been the case with social media movements with a big footprint. Anyone can join the hashtag discussion on *Twitter*; hence, the challenge the activists of social movements face relates to controlling online conversations and ensuring that the discussions are not lost through translation. Various activists concurred that it was difficult to build consensus on social media because of divergent ideas (Zikode 2020; Kalla 2020; Mthombeni 2020; Soxujwa 2020; Jansen-Thomas 2020).

Although the *Twitter* hashtag activism, as practised by the *#feesmustfall* movement, Occupy Wall Street Movement, Arab Springs, and BLM protest has revealed substantial optimism regarding the use of social media in challenging the existing power system (Castells 2012; Gerbaudo 2012; Auoragh and Alexander 2011; Bardici 2012), a lot of changes have taken place since then. Recently, the idea of using

hashtags on *Twitter* has been personalised by algorithms; therefore, trending topics are now made to align with the personal interests of the users, their location and other social strata. This means that two individuals residing in the same place can see different trending topics. Apart from showing personalised trends, the hashtag idea has since been appropriated by business-minded people to promote their brands and products. In critiquing capitalism, Schiller (1999) observed that the internet promotes consumerism. Recently, many *Twitter* hashtags have been plagued with promos and adverts that have nothing to do with a particular trending topic. In some instances, big businesses sponsor prize-based competitions that encourage people to tweet about their brand or products. Furthermore, big businesses also pay social media influencers to tweet about their brands and products. In this way, big businesses normally find themselves trending on *Twitter* at the expense of critical discourses that have the potential to empower marginalised groups. By virtue of relying on promos and endorsement of brands, social media influencers cannot be critical of the established power system. Therefore, social media influencers remain neutral on issues of social importance to avoid upsetting their sponsors. Many celebrities and social media influencers find themselves sharing content related to fashion, food, leisure, and entertainment, which will not get them into conflicts with their potential clients. Within the context of the Marxist tradition, various scholars have demonstrated that entertainment-related content is designed to distract the public from thinking critically about the political issues they are experiencing (Fuchs 2014a, Horkheimer and Adorno 1982, Thompson 2019). However, the recent trend shows that entertainment has also been politicised in order to spread specific ideologies or propaganda.

Alternatively, other social movement activists have also found *Facebook* to be a good tool for organising themselves and voicing their discontent. According to the Hootsuite Graph (2020), *Facebook* is one of the most used social media platforms after *WhatsApp* and *YouTube* (See Figure 1). The popularity of *Facebook* in South Africa has been bolstered by the availability of *Facebook Free Mode*, which is accessible without data. However, the *Facebook Free Mode* does not show pictures, videos or open external links. Although *Facebook* has the potential to function as an alternative media, it is a social medium whose orientation is to connect family and friends. In this case, *Facebook* does not have the potential to offer trending topics and hashtags that are the defining feature of *Twitter*. The evidence from social media analysis reveals

that social movements that use *Facebook* have fewer engagements. To circumvent the situation that is characterised by low engagement rates, *Facebook* pages are required to boost their posts to increase their engagement levels. This phenomenon can potentially deprive the social movements that do not have money to remain frail. This corroborates Kent's (2008) argument which notes that grassroots movements are excluded from competing for fans owing to little digital capital.

The issue of low engagement rates has also been exacerbated by *Facebook* algorithms, which make it difficult for social movement pages to organically increase their reach. Jansen-Thomas (2020, interviewee) indicated that it is becoming more difficult to reach out to more people on *Facebook* without paying *Facebook*. Individual *Facebook* users are more likely to interact with content from their friends and families rather than from organisations' *Facebook* pages. The situation in which like-minded individuals are connecting with each other on *Facebook* is characterised as homophily. Mpofu-Walsh (2021) perceived homophily to be socially engineered through algorithms. The fact that *Facebook* friend suggestion functionality recommends friends who look alike has a likelihood to cause a disjuncture in race, class, and gender relations. The issues of homophily and echo-chambers were also identified by Mukhudwana (2020) on the *Twitter* pages of various South African political figures such as Cyril Ramaphosa, Julius Malema, Mmusi Maimane and Bantu Holomisa. However, it was also noted that such homophily and echo-chambers were not rigid and susceptible to interferences because *Twitter* discourses play in open public spaces.

Recently, social media has assumed the role of an elite public sphere rather than an alternative public sphere. This scenario is mainly attributed to the fact that alternative discourses are always challenged by the lack of engagement from the intended audiences. Various scholars concurred that the discourses of the activists are lost online because the internet prioritises the elites (Curran 2012; Fenton 2017). Social media platforms do not empower the marginalised, who tend to get low searches online. The suppression of topics that speak to the cause of the marginalised has serious implications for the role social media plays in democratising society. Research findings indicate that the NGO sector, which encompasses civil society groupings such as social movements, has the lowest engagement rate compared to other sectors such

as entertainment, sports, shopping or retail, media and news, E-commerce, food and beverages (see Figure 9). Evidently, social movements lack the potential to develop a fan culture and they continue to rely on the mainstream media or popular channels in disseminating their messages. Kent (2008) indicated that the challenge imposed by elite channels is that they use fan numbers to exert influence on their followers. This suggests that being on social media does not necessarily translate to having a voice. This situation has also been explained by Couldry (2010), who was concerned about the inequality of voices being accelerated by the neoliberal era. The voices of the rich are louder than those of the poor. Having a formidable audience enables a movement to have an impact on social media spaces. In this case, social movements build their audience over a long period, whereas elite channels can amass a large audience over a relatively shorter period because they have big budgets for advertising and marketing. Nevertheless, social movements continue using *Facebook* to communicate their issues despite registering low engagement rates. The previous chapter indicated that social movements use social media due to various reasons (see Chapter 5). The analysis of the *Facebook* pages of social movements indicates that they use the social media platform to share photos portraying social events, press releases, speeches, and links from news sites that cover their stories.

## 6.6 Conclusion

This chapter closely analysed the social media pages of selected social movements such as *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, *#feesmustfall*, *Equal Education*, *Landless People's Movement* and the *Unemployed People's Movement*. This was done in response to the second research sub-question, which sought to investigate the extent to which social media accelerates alternative voices. The analysis revealed the various trends on *Twitter*, such as hashtag activism, hashtivism or slacktivism. Whilst the hashtag is important in connecting social movements, there are emerging challenges that cannot be ignored. The practice of uncoordinated reporting, which makes it difficult for the activists to speak in one voice, is highly apparent. The social media algorithms, which tend to favour the financially rich whilst inhibiting the social movements to communicate their discourses, are also a cause for concern. Recently, there has been an expropriation of the hashtag by powerful and influential groups of people on social media, resulting in the visibility of social movements being scant. On the other hand, *Facebook* was also used to communicate the discourses of social movements.

However, the activities of social movements on *Facebook* were marred by low engagement rates. The social media analysis also reveals that social media is an elitist media which prioritises the ideas of the dominant groups, thus rendering social movements less visible. The next chapter delves into the various challenges that undermine the potential of social media as alternative media.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: THE DIGITAL CONUNDRUM: THREATS AND CONSTRAINTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN BECOMING A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA**

### **7.1 Introduction**

Alternative formations have embraced social media despite its challenges. This chapter details the threats and constraints that prohibit social media from becoming a viable alternative media. The chapter responds to the third research sub-question, which sought to investigate the threats that impede social media from becoming a key player in the alternative media foray. Social media has allowed social movements to communicate without hindrance, but this appears to be a temporary euphoria. Literature on alternative media has already highlighted that even before the dawn of new media, alternative media formations had been experiencing the challenge of credibility because they had been relying on inexperienced volunteers (Fedler 1978; O'Sullivan 1998) and shrinking donor funding (Berger 1998; Lloyd et al. 2010; Mpofu 1996). The new media era has brought both pleasant and unpleasant situations. The social movement's activists who were interviewed in this research have also identified several constraints that hinder the ability of social media to become a platform that can emancipate the marginalised. Key among the constraints are the persistent digital divide, the proliferation of fake news, the negative impact of social media on cultures, suppression of critical discussion, spies, and hackers.

### **7.2 Digital divide**

Contrary to the belief that Africans are using the internet to challenge the existing power systems, Mutsvairo (2016) avers that Africans are still excluded because of a lack of compatible devices and/or the internet. In the context of this study, the digital divide emerged as a constraint during the interviews conducted with various activists representing the selected social movements. The problem of the digital divide is inevitable in South Africa, a country that is battling the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty, and inequality. The COVID-19 disaster, which has increased the pace towards the digital age, has exacerbated the digital divide. A participant had this to say:

*South Africa is one of the societies with the highest levels of inequality in the world. I think the digital divide is clearly visible in various fashions; these digital divides are also*



*visible within the social media spaces (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

Internet penetration in South Africa only reaches out to 64% of the population (Statista 2021). Although there has been a steady increase in the number of people connected to the internet, these numbers remain low when compared to statistics of those connected in first-world countries. In South Africa, the digital divide seems to undermine the gains of the internet age. Within the fraternity of social movements, the situation is also exacerbated by the extent to which the social movements represent the plight of the oppressed people, such as the poor students, the unemployed, and the landless, groups that are often referred to as the digital subalterns or digital immigrants. Many of them consistently lack access to the internet. Even those with access to the internet have limited voices. Although access to the internet seemingly appears to be an ultimate goal, poor people have a lot of pressing needs that may be pivotal to their survival (Mutsvairo 2016). As such, access to the internet may not triumph over access to basic needs, such as food, water, shelter, warmth, and safety. Thus, a poor person is more likely to buy bread or maize meal than an internet bundle.

Various social movements experience the digital divide in various ways. The ABM activist mentioned that the digital divide remains a challenge in South Africa because the country records the highest levels of inequality in the world. The activist said:

*We must also highlight the fact that not everyone has access to social media. People may have smartphones, but they do not always have data or access to the internet. One may want to be online today but may only have data the next day. Of course, for the elderly people at home, not only in the shacks and rural communities, it is still really not feasible for some communities to make use of the internet (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

The problem of the digital divide is exacerbated by the fact that ABM represents a diverse group that includes the subalterns, particularly the elderly and rural people. As indicated in the previous chapter, the *#feesmustfall* movement managed to leave its mark because it was led by techno-savvy students who had access to the Wi-Fi and other devices that were provided by the University. Figure 7 also confirms that social media spaces are dominated by the youth. Zikode (2020 interviewee) also indicated that to bridge the digital divide; younger people have to assist the elderly in navigating

those divides.

The issue of lack of access to the internet also emerged during the conversation with activists from the *#feesmustfall*, UPM, and LPM. The *#feesmustfall* activist, in this case, indicated that although they had limited resources, they had to provide data bundles to some of the students who were part of their organising team (Kalla 2020, interviewee). On the other side, Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) also suspected that the digital divide can be attributed to the low response rate:

*I suspect that the low response rate might be attributable to issues of data, network or poor devices. As you know, the Landless People's Movement is not funded and we sacrifice to raise money from our own pockets; therefore, we cannot have adequate resources in that way* (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee).

This scenario occurs mainly because their movement (LPM) is self-sufficient and draws its resources from its members. Such resources are inadequate and hence they encounter issues of lack of internet access, poor devices, and poor network coverage (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee). The issue of poor network coverage is worsened by the fact that the movement is rural-based. The network coverage is skewed toward urban centres, a scenario that leaves the rural areas with limited or no access to the network.

The activist from UPM also detailed their own experiences of the digital divide within their movement, thus:

*We do struggle at some points because we have our online Political Education series. So, it is not easy for us to provide data to every activist* (Soxujwa 2020, interviewee).

To counter this undesirable situation, discussions were normally held physically to accommodate the unemployed people, who were the main stakeholders of UPM. They would gather in person to discuss issues affecting them.

On the other side, EE also found connectivity to be a challenge. Jansen-Thomas (2020, interviewee) reported that “the reality is that while some of these young people do not have smartphones, others do not have phones at all”. The EE activist added that when there is online engagement like a *Facebook* live discussion, some young

people often experience technological issues.

*You could face problems of connectivity because the phone would freeze and then one would get cut off. I think the most important thing is to make allowances for that and to understand that these are the challenges that young people face (Jansen-Thomas 2020).*

The solution to the issue of the digital divide lies in the use of a combination of platforms and complementing this with their own media because no tool is perfect (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee). In an attempt to bridge the digital divide, the activists also created a *WhatsApp* group where they could share their stories. Accessing *WhatsApp* also requires data, but it is the most easily accessible platform because various networks have introduced *WhatsApp* bundles at a lower cost compared to the traditional internet bundle. Figure 1 indicates that *WhatsApp* is the most easily accessible of all the social media platforms in South Africa.

The literature identified three levels of the digital divide (Van Dijk 2012; Ragnedda 2017). The first level of the digital divide involves material and physical access. This type of digital divide is the most prevalent because it encompasses issues such as lack of devices, lack of internet, or ineffective internet infrastructure. All the activists in the social movements identified with the first level of the digital divide. For instance, Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) indicated that some activists were failing to participate due to poor phones and lack of internet connectivity, which has also become the subject of hashtag activism. Inspired by the Fallist Movement, the *#datamustfall* was a movement organically inclined towards challenging the high prices of data in South Africa. The high cost of data has been one of the thorny issues in South Africa. The *#datamustfall* movement made its way to social media platforms such as *Twitter* and an online petition has been signed by 57000 people who were concerned about the high price of data. Network providers have been slow in their response, blaming the State for sitting with the valuable (limited) frequency. Many social movements have been present on social media, especially *Facebook*, in spite of the low level of engagement. Some networks, such as *Vodacom*, *MTN* and *CellC*, have made the *Facebook* Free Mode version accessible without data. However, the *Facebook* Free Mode does not show pictures, videos or open external links. Although the efforts made by network providers are commendable, the users of the *Facebook* Free Mode do not

fully experience the benefit of using *Facebook* and other sites. This entails that they are still being excluded due to the digital divide.

The second level of the digital divide relates to the lack of skills, motivation, and usage. Access to the internet does not guarantee digital engagement. The activists also require the skills and motivation to use social media. This type of digital divide was demonstrated by the UPM activist, who indicated that some people often take too long to respond to their phones (Soxujwa 2020, interviewee). In this case, they miss important communications, and as such, the response rate was always low. The third level of the digital divide is concerned with the knowledge and skills gained from online engagements. Whilst it is clear that many people spend more time on social media, much of their time is not spent on meaningful engagements that can change their lives or circumstances. Because of the nature of social media, which is commercially driven, entertainment and popular content have always been prioritised at the expense of critical engagements. The first level of the digital divide in South Africa overshadows the second and third levels of the digital divide. In conceptualising the digital divide, African decolonial thinkers have also noted the digital divide within the confines of language, culture and geography (Wa Thiong'o 1993; Moyo 2018; Mutsvairo 2016). Although the digital divide, which is concerned with the materials and the physical divide, is still prevalent in Africa. The digital divide, which is entrenched by language and the cultural divide, is the next frontier of the digital divide in Africa.

### **7.3 Fake news**

Apart from the digital divide, the issue of fake news emerged as one of the dark sides of social media. Emerging literature indicates that fake news may be used to counter the democratisation process (Kupe 2021; Kamau 2017; Unwin 2012; Kamp 2016). Unwin (2012) notes that social media is now a breeding ground for terrorists, hate groups and right-wing formations. Undoubtedly, social media presents an alternative space for social movements to voice their discontent. However, the positive role played by social media in the democratisation process has been marred by fake news and the destructive elements accompanying it. These assertions were confirmed by the activists of social movements within South Africa. One activist said:

*Fake news has always been a challenge and the problem has now escalated in the wake of the Coronavirus. Whilst Coronavirus is a pandemic on its own, fake news is*

*also a pandemic. Within the #Feesmustfall movement, we had to deal with the challenges of rumours, misinformation, and accusations. The word 'sell-out' has been doing rounds on social media platforms and we had to have a counter-narrative to put it out. You had to defend yourself on social media and that started to get quite difficult because we were not just dealing with Wits students, we were dealing with fake accounts, bots, and political instigators (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

Similar sentiments were shared by Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists who claimed that *Twitter* is one of the most toxic social media platforms (Stephen 2015). There were lots of White supremacists who were working very hard to discredit their campaign on *Twitter*. As indicated in Chapter 6, the #feesmustfall activists had to deal with the University and the mainstream media, which also used social media to paint a different narrative. Therefore, the activists had to always keep track of what was happening and challenge the false narrative from a variety of detractors. According to Kalla (2020, interviewee), the strategies they used to correct false narratives paid off because they started as hooligans but ended up being heroes. This demonstrates that effective measures have to be put in place to run a successful social media campaign.

#### **7.4 Impact of Social media on cultures and language**

As Bagdikian (2007) put it, social media firms reflect the culture and attitudes of the industrialised nations. The concern arising from the impact of the internet on culture and languages has been tackled by decolonial scholars such as Moyo (2018) and Wa Thiong'o (1993). Moyo (2018) argues that the internet is a virtual form of coloniality, as it forms part of the broader matrix of Western imperialism. This is likely to put African cultures in an undesirable position. Therefore, it is not surprising to note that internet creators are populating the internet with their images and cultural expressions that can challenge local cultures and traditions.

The discussion that centres on the culture of the internet resonates well with the views of the ABM activists who reiterated the negative impact of social media on their culture.

*In the wake of the 4IR, one cannot deny the reality characterising the transition to modern technology. However, to a certain degree, modern technology is not our culture. While modern technology is good, it does some damage to our humanity, specifically being present physically and spiritually for the people. Now, with social*

*media, it is no longer necessary for people to travel because it is possible to communicate on Microsoft Teams and Zoom (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

The idea of being physically and spiritually present for the people resonates with the concept of Ubuntu. Social movements are embedded within the concept of Ubuntu, an African expression that entails that a person is a person because of others (“Umntu, ngumntu, ngabantu”). This expression cannot be practically demonstrated in social media spaces. Social media is presumed to take away the sense of Ubuntu. Therefore, that level of companionship and caring is lacking on social media, thus eroding the potential of Ubuntu.

*The fact that you do not see the people you are engaging with in a discussion takes away what we call Ubuhlali, which embodies the spirit of Ubuntu. Without saying that it is anti-African, but as you know, as Abantu it is always important to see the face of someone (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

In this case, the social movements also preferred face-to-face engagements in order to continue instilling the long-standing cultural practices of Ubuntu and respect. However, social media does not have those values because people hide behind the screen. Older people are disrespected and sometimes fall victim to various online scams. In this instance, some older people experience technophobia because social media does not have traditional boundaries.

In addition, African decolonial thinkers, such as Wa Thiong’o (1993), have long theorised that the internet has become a tool driving cultural imperialism that affirms the position of English as a global language. The social media analysis done in the previous chapter revealed that social movements mostly post their content in English, a de facto language of social media. The dominance of English as a global language has resulted in the suppression of African languages. Wa Thiong’o (1993) indicated that language is an important factor in the decolonisation of the minds of the oppressed because it is through languages that people’s culture and history are transmitted. The previous chapter has also revealed that social movements communicate in English, which is a de facto language of the internet. The dominance of English on the internet and social media signals the impending wave of cultural imperialism and those who are not competent in English are likely to be excluded from the social media sphere.

Some activists reported that the *SABC* and community radios are good sources of news because they speak to the communities in the language that they understand and can culturally relate to (see Jansen-Thomas, Mthombeni and Soxujwa 2020 interviewees). Jansen-Thomas (2020) emphasised the importance of non-English radio stations, thus:

*We recognised that community radio stations and big radio stations that do not broadcast in English are important platforms that speak to EE members and their families and also to the people and communities that are mostly impacted by educational inequality* (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee).

Soxujwa also indicated that the *SABC* was friendly to their cause. The interviewee said, “We are using *SABC* to publish our stories and they are telling our stories as they are” (Soxujwa 2020, interviewee). The *SABC* is an important broadcaster because it has the mandate to broadcast in 11 official languages. Whereas Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) indicated that “the most accessible one to us is a local community radio.” Community radios are expected to broadcast in local languages. In terms of newspapers, there is a shortage of this medium in indigenous South African languages. The majority of the mainstream newspapers in South Africa cater for English and Afrikaans audiences, with the exception of *Isolezwe* and *Ilanga*.

## **7.5 The suppression of critical discussion**

Critical scholars such as Curran (2000), Herman and Chomsky (2008), and Horkheimer and Adorno (1982) have theorised that the commercially driven media stifle critical debates in favour of entertainment. The findings also indicate that social media platforms do not accommodate serious discussion. Anyone posting a critical discussion on social media identifies with this point. On social media, critical points of discussion are likely to receive fewer engagements. The analysis of social media in the previous chapter revealed a lot of text-based statuses such as press releases and speeches which received fewer reactions and engagements. This is contrary to the statuses involving images and videos that were likely to receive more engagements. Images are easy to decode because they do not require many cognitive skills that reading requires. It is for this reason that watching television and listening to radio are more popular than reading a book. Social media platforms such as *Instagram* and

*TikTok* are booming because they are picture-based or video-based.

It is also important to note that *Twitter*, which is a microblogging social media platform, has a character limit that may restrict its users from giving a detailed account of what is happening. *Twitter* allows users to post messages in less than 250 characters per tweet. Prior to 2018, the character limit was only 140 characters. This is very restrictive for anyone posting a comprehensive account of a particular issue. This means the users must post multiple short and disjointed messages throughout the event. Such limitations inhibit critical discussion, thereby limiting freedom of expression.

Social media are corporate sites that are in pursuit of advertising revenue; hence, entertainment is one of its draw cards. Throughout the world, sports people or artists who always post their images and videos seem to be more dominant on social media. The top 50 of the most followed *Facebook* pages include soccer players like Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, Rihanna (musician), Chris Rock (comedian), Dwayne Johnson (actor) and many other personalities. None of these celebrities post critical discussions on their social media accounts. Rather, their content is seen as promoting conspicuous consumption because people on the ground want to adopt celebrity status. Many young people end up in debt or depressed because they want to adopt celebrity looks. Hunt, Marx, Lipson, and Young (2018) indicate that users bombarded by pictures of success or happy people on social media often end up feeling hopeless about their own situations.

This reveals that social media is driven by the desire to satisfy users' entertainment needs. Since social media are accessible for free, individual users are considered a product. Targeted advertising is one of the advances in the field of digital advertising and because of that, advertisers get accurate figures on how many people clicked their advertisements, demographics, and location. The social movements or non-governmental organisations that are often considered anti-capitalist establishments are unlikely to succeed in these types of structures that are purely capitalistic.

## **7.6 Spies, hackers and unsolicited advertising**

The social movement activists also identified spies, hackers and unsolicited advertising as some of the challenges they experienced on social media. Soxujwa (2020, interviewee) was basically concerned about spies who tried all the means to



counter their campaign. The UPM activist said the biggest challenge affecting social media is people who are following them in order to spy on them. According to Soxujwa (2020, interviewee), “people have to understand that when fighting for liberation or a change in our society, there are always individuals who are used by the system to derail those efforts.” In this case, the activists had to use social media carefully to avoid those who were spying on them.

On the other side, the LPM also raised issues related to hackers and those who advertise their things on social media pages as some of the challenges they faced in the social media age (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee). Social media spaces are characterised by the preponderance of hackers and other people who advertise their get-rich-quick scams. Unsuspecting social media users may be vulnerable to these types of scams and the trust they have in social media can be diminished. Other users may become technophobic due to the fear of falling victim to scammers and hackers that infiltrate all social media platforms. As such, Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) believed that the new technology should allay their fear of hackers, those who infiltrate their messages, and those who frustrate their voice on social media. He further believed that firewalls should be set up to protect them against those who divert their messages. Eventually, the messages should reach the intended recipient and address issues of low response rates (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee).

## **7.7 Accelerate the phenomenon of individualism**

Collective identity is the key tenet of the social movements. Various scholars have argued that social media has resulted in what is called the ‘politics of individuation’ (Fenton and Barassi 2011) or individualism (Curran 2012). This threatens group identities that are observed in social movements, and this is likely to divide or destabilise the social movements. Within the South African context, Zikode (2020, interviewee) elaborated that social media is threatening their cultural identities which underpinned the concept of ‘Ubuntu.’ This section determines whether social media enables social movements to speak with one voice. The research question sought to ascertain whether social media can be used to build consensus and move the movements forward.

In addition to individualism, Gladwell (2010) and Kwak et al. (2010) noted that social

media is built around weak bonds. This entails that many people on social media are following or being followed by people they have never met (Gladwell 2010). The weak ties that characterise social media may make it difficult to build consensus and speak with one voice. The interview responses from social activists also maintain that social media is not highly effective in allowing its members to speak in one voice and build consensus. In responding to whether social media allowed social movements to speak in one voice and build consensus, Kalla responded as follows:

*I think social media was a good way of communicating where we were and what we needed, though not always. So, it was more or less like on a reporting basis that we were discussing certain matters at a meeting that we needed this and that and to get updates on pertinent issues. Although physical meetings were still preferred, WhatsApp was a good way of just being on the same page with others and share things that were happening thus keeping track of them. The bulk of the communication happened at mass meetings and other meetings that often took place on the ground (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

This reveals that whilst social media helped activists to update each other about the progress of the movement, a lot of decisions were taken offline at the meetings. On the other side, Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) said, “we do try to communicate through *WhatsApp* group wherein we seek resolutions on various matters, though *WhatsApp* cannot be said to be 100% effective.” The traditional way of meeting was seen as a more effective way of arriving at a resolution. He also highlighted other issues affecting social media, particularly the low response rate (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee). This was predictable since they represented the constituency of landless people. Whereas Soxujwa (2020, interviewee) indicated that they often held concrete discussions over social media, but they hardly discussed everything on such platforms. They only used social media to reach out to one another. According to Soxujwa (2020, interviewee), “when planning something big and is likely to change the situation of our people, we do not do it on social media”. Therefore, social media is not considered a safe space to have concrete and meaningful discussions because the establishments that are anti-social movements would be busy monitoring their activities on those platforms.

On the other side, Jansen-Thomas (2020, interviewee) indicated that they always held big physical meetings to set their priorities.

*I do not think that social media is necessarily a place where we can build consensus. A lot of that work has to happen beforehand. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us to try and convene online meetings that we would normally hold in person (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee).*

Such meetings were often convened through live *Facebook* engagements and on *Twitter* spaces. Jansen-Thomas (2020, interviewee) added that, “instead of members gathering in person, they would gather on *Facebook* and convene live meetings on that social media platform.” These comments demonstrate that although social media faces the challenges of individualism, there are other functions within social media spaces that make activists feel closer to each other. The next chapter dwells on how *Facebook* is pushing the level of social connectedness to the next level by advancing the concept of the metaverse, which blends reality and the virtual world (Meta 2021).

### **7.8 Impact on the democratic ideals of social movements**

Whilst some writers like Jenkins (2008) and Castells (2012) predict that social media will breed new forms of democracy, other activists believe that social media compromises the democratic principles that underpin their social movements. As discussed in the previous sections, social media faces multiple challenges that include the digital divide, fake news, adverse impact on cultures and languages, suppression of critical discussion, the elevation of the elite voices, the rise of conspicuous consumption, acceleration of the concept of individualism, and the preponderance of spies, hackers as well as unsolicited advertising. All these factors may negatively impact the role social media plays in the democratisation process.

On the other hand, the hysteria around social media is also challenged by the political belief system of the social movements. Although social media is commended for allowing the members of the movements to tell their own stories, Zikode (2020, interviewee) indicated that the platform is not instilling their democratic principles. Since ABM is regarded as a grassroots democratic movement, social media fell short of instilling its fundamental democratic principles. In this case, the activists preferred face-to-face contact in an attempt to instil the democratic principles underpinning their movement. Bailey et al. (2008) aptly described alternative media as a rhizome because it instils grassroots politics. The ABM activist also added that social media

compromises “the value of Ubuhlali and the principles of democratic formations” (Zikode 2020, interviewee). The term ‘Ubuhlali’ is derived from ‘Ubuntu’, which entails togetherness. For instance, it is currently impossible for the activists to conduct the People’s Assembly or *Abahlali* Council, or any other big meeting on social media (Zikode 2020, interviewee). The digital divide is seen as a hindrance in getting several subaltern groups at an online engagement.

*As much as social media gives us political mileage, we are able to communicate whatever we want to the existing political structures. However, it is not perfect and it does compromise the democratic practices of our movement, especially as we believe in democracy that develops from below. From time to time, Abahlali have a branch launch and local elections at a community level in the way of encouraging democratic practices in the informal settlements. As a way of democratising informal settlements, the local branches elect leaders, so we are still trying to figure out how to proceed with this democratic principle that Abahlali adheres to (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

Therefore, social media does not adhere to the traditional organisational model that ABM structures adhere to. Social media, which are disruptive in nature, may support various models of organising with more complex relations than the traditional bottom-up approach. The bottom-up approach is central in social movements, but it is not supported by these new tools that prioritise the elite culture.

## **7.9 Discussions and reflections**

This chapter has identified the challenges that undermine the potential of social media to disseminate alternative discourses emanating from the social movements within the South African context. The Post-Colonial Subaltern Theory framed this study, as it is concerned about the expropriation of marginal voices by the dominant groups. The theory is relevant to this study because the media, in its various manifestations, is consistently instrumental in representing the interests of the dominant groups. The concept of the digital subaltern, which is specifically linked to the digital divide, has gained traction in the digital age. The new frontier of the digital subaltern is characterised by the language and cultural divide which is apparent in the Global South. This theory clearly explains the situation of the subaltern in the era of social media.

Alternative media, as described by Fuchs (2010), exhibits the following characteristics:

citizen journalism, critical form or content, grassroots media groups, and alternative distribution. Thus, the social movements engage in some forms of alternative reporting; however, the extent of alternative reporting is undermined by a variety of challenges, which include the digital divide, fake news, spies and hackers, dominant narratives, suppression of critical discussions, the extent to which it negatively impacts on cultural issues and lack of consensus. The following section critically engages the above-mentioned challenges in an attempt to provide a critical analysis of social media as alternative media. The Post-Colonial Subaltern Theory was used to conceptualise some of these debates.

### **7.9.1 Universal access questioned**

Various contemporary scholars have identified the digital divide as one of the challenges (Van Dijk 2018; Ragnedda and Muschert 2018). The challenges emanating from the digital divide are more prevalent within the African context. Although South Africa has made significant progress in terms of accelerating universal access to mobile phones and network coverage, access to the internet remains a challenge to the majority of the marginalised people. In terms of physical access, the price of the internet is prohibitive to most of the marginalised South Africans. A study conducted by Pillay and Maharaj (2014) has demonstrated the low uptake of social media and digital services due to socio-economic activities and the higher cost of communication. The authors also demonstrated the correlation between the low GDP per capita and the low uptake of digital services (ibid). The country's socio-economic landscape remains fragmented along the lines of the 'haves' and the 'have-nots', a reality that has been laid bare through the unequal allocation of digital services. Statistics SA (2019) indicated that 55.5% of South Africans live below the poverty line of R992 per month. Against the backdrop of this level of poverty, access to the internet is often perceived as a luxury. As a result, only 64% of the South African population can access the internet (Statista 2021).

Limited or lack of access to the internet has led to the creation of the *Twitter*-bound movement known as *#datamustfall*. The movement sought to influence telecommunications networks to lower the prices of internet. During the State of the Nation Address (SONA 2020), President Ramaphosa cited the high prices of the

internet as a hindrance to economic growth in South Africa. During his speech, the President also supported various regulatory mechanisms proposed by ICASA to lower the internet's cost and offer free access to some internet sites (SONA 2020). However, the government's stance on the cost of communication is contradicted by the fact that the government directly or indirectly controls a significant stake in the biggest mobile companies. According to MyBroadband (2022), the South African government owns a 40.5% stake in Telkom and another 14.8% stake through PIC, which is the government investment arm. Therefore, the government, which somewhat benefits from the high cost to communicate, may hesitate to implement measures meant to lower the cost of data. On the other hand, Shanduka, an investment company owned by President Ramaphosa, holds some shares in MTN Group (Vorster 2012). Mr Ramaphosa was also one of the non-executive directors at MTN Group before becoming the President of South Africa. The associations of telecommunication companies with the government or political leaders may absolve these companies from playing a role in lowering the cost of data.

Regulatory interventions are required to introduce new players and to overthrow the concentration of ownership in the telecommunications industry. This will in turn drive down the prices of broadband or internet. On the other hand, physical access is also prohibited by a lack of telecommunication and electrical infrastructure. The phenomenon where a telecommunications company allocates greater bandwidth to urban areas than rural areas has been characterised as 'electronic red lining' (Sewchurran 2016). Due to electronic red lining, internet penetration in South Africa seems to target the affluent neighbourhoods that have financial means. Affluent neighbourhoods are equipped with new generation broadband technologies such as 5G, Fibre, LTE or LTE-Advanced, whereas many rural areas are excluded from such technologies that enable fast and reliable connections to the internet. In some remote rural areas, access to mobile networks is virtually non-existent. Consequently, the electronic red lining in South Africa emulates the demarcations of the unjust apartheid spatial laws (see Lloyd et al. 2010).

In addition, Statistics SA (2019) indicated that 15% of South Africans had no electricity connected to their houses. Lack of access to electricity may also perpetuate the digital divide. Digital devices that enable access to the internet require electricity to have their

batteries recharged. Consequently, people who reside in informal settlements and remote rural areas are victims of a lack of electricity and internet coverage. On the other hand, 85% of people who have electricity also experience issues of load-shedding and load reduction. Load-shedding is one of the thorny issues in South Africa and has been ongoing since 2007. However, wealthy people are less likely to be affected by load-shedding than the poor since they have backup systems such as batteries, generators and solar power. This entails that load-shedding affects the poor or the middle class, who cannot afford backup systems. In addition to load-shedding, Eskom also implements a load-reduction programme, a strategy that limits electricity supply in areas that have numerous illegal connections. A report by the Centre for Sociological Research and Practice (2022) indicates that load-reduction represents energy-related racism because it is mostly implemented in Black communities like Soweto and other working-class communities. Whenever there is load-shedding or load-reduction, mobile phone base stations also shut down due to widespread theft of backup batteries<sup>16</sup>. Rural areas that depend on one base station are more likely to face network downtime during load-shedding or load-reduction periods. All these issues culminate in what Castells (2010) calls the 'fourth world'.

The 'fourth world' refers to the type of inequalities that are created by the lack of technology in any given country (Castells 2010). The rapid rate at which technological developments are taking place in rich countries always outpaces that of poor countries. When the first world has adopted 5G or Wi-Fi 6 network, the whole world is expected to upgrade to these latest technologies in order to be part of the new network society. Poor countries are referred to as the fourth world because they are left behind as the first-world countries adopt new technological developments that are driven by capitalism.

Empirical evidence also indicates that the prices of mobile data (internet) remain very high. The social movements that were examined in this study represent the marginalised and most of their followers are characterised as digital subalterns. According to Kent (2008), the digital subalterns are deprived of their own voice and always depend on the elite to relay their messages. Kent (2008) adds that the digital

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<sup>16</sup> The demand for backup batteries has increased due loadshedding. Some criminals have resorted to stealing the backup batteries from the cell-phone network base stations.

subalterns cannot speak out against or gain visibility without the help of the elites. Daniels (2016) also acknowledges that *Twitter* is an elite medium accessed by those who have access to the internet; thus, many are excluded from the *Twitter* sphere. The findings of this study demonstrate that social movements represent the subaltern group who are not part of the dominant group. Since the social movements represent the marginalised, such as the unemployed, landless, and the poor, the digital divide is always prevalent. Because of poverty, the subalterns are more concerned about where their next meal will come from; therefore, access to the internet is not their priority. Mutsvairo (2016) indicated that the immediate priority for many Africans is to put food on the table rather than participate in digital activism.

The digital divide always inhibits the participation of the digital subalterns within social movements. The analysis of social media in this study indicated that social movements are characterised by fewer fans and engagements. This situation has been exacerbated by the lack of digital capital or fan culture, which promotes the voices of social movements. In this case, Kent (2008) defined the subalterns as people without a voice. As such, it is intriguing to note that social media has not changed the status quo, which is defined by dominant actors, who determine what circulates in the public domain. This has been theorised by earlier thinkers such as Engels and Marx (1845) and Horkheimer and Adorno (1982), who indicated that the class that controls material production also controls mental production.

### **7.9.2 The post-truth era**

The chapter also identified fake news as a serious challenge characterising the digital age. Kamau (2017) indicated that social media may become a threat to democracy when it facilitates the broadcasting of fake news and discourses that are likely to entrench right-wing politics. In South Africa, right-wing ideologies include the view that apartheid and White supremacy should return. The waving of the banned apartheid flag emerged recently within South African social media circles. Mpofu-Walsh (2021) believes that social media is reinforcing the apartheid philosophy because social media algorithms are engineered through homophily, which entails that people are more likely to see statuses from people who look like them. Mukhudwana (2020) also mentioned that homophily is likely to create an uninformed citizenry, personalised politics, and a group of citizens that have not been exposed to alternative ideas. Being



a polarised country, South Africa does not need homophily and echo-chambers because this is likely to reverse the prevailing social cohesion. Social media platforms are promoting extreme views around the sensitive issues of race and gender. It is not surprising to note that right-wing politics have found solace in social media. This illustrates the extent to which social media can hamper democracy by allowing hate speech and fake news to thrive.

The post-truth era has also been accelerated by a number of *Twitter* profiles that use pseudonyms (not the real names of users). Pseudonyms feature prominently during hashtag discussions occurring on *Twitter* rather than on *Facebook*. According to Gehl (2015), *Facebook* insists on revealing real identities in order to appeal to marketers. Whilst some users prefer using pseudonyms to protect their identity and express their views without experiencing any victimisation from their superiors or law enforcement agencies, other anonymous profiles contribute to some of the toxic debates that are apparent on *Twitter*. Fake news, racial bigotry, toxic masculinity, misogyny, tribalism, xenophobia, child pornography, homophobia, and other hate crimes are commonplace on *Twitter* because the social media platform brings together people from divergent backgrounds into the same debate through hashtags. Expressions like “*Twitter* is not for the faint-hearted” are echoed by those who are familiar with the toxicity of *Twitter* spaces. This thinking goes together with expressions like “one must develop a thick skin on *Twitter*”, which entails that *Twitter* is not a place for those who take offence and abuse seriously. These sentiments, which relate to the toxic nature of *Twitter*, were also revealed by BLM activists. Stephen (2015) indicated that social media has become another arena where Black people are abused for trying to raise the touchy subject of race. Due to the large amount of content being shared on these platforms, monitoring every activity on social media becomes a mammoth task. According to Nakamura in Stephen (2015), the challenge of social media is that “what happens on *Twitter* is really, really private.” This is a significant departure from the traditional media, where televised footage of racial injustices would become powerful symbols because they were so public. Online threats are largely disembodied and anonymous and the effects of such threats are mostly felt by those who read them (Stephen 2015).

The post-truth or fake news era is also fuelled by many users competing for likes, comments, followers, and reactions. The *#feesmustfall* activist indicated that fake

news is a pandemic on its own as it spreads faster than real news (Kalla 2020, interviewee). Many users who are fighting for clout are resorting to spreading fear-mongering rumours in order to attract the attention of other users. Some of these users aspire to gain more followers and then sell their accounts at a later stage or become social media influencers. Social media influencers have an influence on social media and are part of the dominant culture which is the basic feature defining social media today. Social media influencers are likely to be considered by brands and advertisers since they have more influence on social media. In this environment, stories about social justice are often overwhelmed by fake news and propaganda shared by troops of fake accounts that are pervasive on social media. This can potentially render legitimate social justice movements less visible in social media spaces.

### **7.9.3 A microcosm of an unequal society**

The other challenge attributable to social media is the acceleration of unequal power relationships. The relationships that prevail on social media mimic real-life relationships. In a capitalist world that is characterised by a high level of social inequality, social media or the internet seemingly perpetuates those inequalities (Couldry 2010; Schiller 1999; Curran 2012; Ragnedda 2017; Schwab 2016; Castells 2010). By default, every person has been given a voice to express their wish. However, not all voices are equal (Couldry 2010). The lesser-known individuals are always at the bottom of society in terms of friendship, connections and influence. In contrast, the popular members of society are always at the top of society and whatever they post appears to carry much weight. Similarly, Bosch (2016) revealed that influential users like Gareth Cliff, Eusebius McKaiser, and E-News dominated *Twitter* clusters during the *#feesmustfall* protest. Precisely, their accounts received more engagement than the activists who played a crucial role during the protest. This shows that social media is a microcosm of society since it replicates the existing unequal power relations. In Marxist terms, the dominant class continues to use social media to affirm their ideas and dominate the working class.

This occurs because social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* use algorithms to prioritise the lives of celebrities and politicians. Wealthy people or their companies use their money to buy fans. The list of the most followed social media accounts includes top celebrities and big brands that can afford to advertise their

accounts (Companies such as *Coca-Cola* and *McDonald's* have 107 million and 80 million *Facebook* followers, respectively). Recently, the owner of *Twitter*, Elon Musk has launched *Twitter Blue*, which is the paid version of *Twitter*. *Twitter Blue* will give the paying subscribers additional features that are not available in the free version. Such additional features include a verification badge, ability to post longer videos and priority in searches, replies or mentions. This could be seen as another way of getting the voices of the paying subscribers ahead of the non-paying subscribers. Although social media has been characterised as revolutionary by scholars like Castells (2012), emerging evidence calls for a rethink. The social movements are unable to make an impact or set an agenda on social media because they hardly subscribe to the dominant culture. In this case, they continue to rely on the mainstream channels to speak for them. Kent (2008) alluded to the notion that subalterns rely on the elite to assert their voice. This entails that social media has not changed the status quo with regard to the social movement as they continue to occupy the margins of society.

In addition, Kwak et al. (2010) indicated that the *Twitter* follower-following relationship is not always reciprocal, as most celebrities have more followers than those that they are following. This situation is replicated in real-life relationships, where celebrities are known by many people that they do not know. Quite often, ordinary *Twitter* members complain about celebrities who do not comment on or reply to their tweets. Celebrities normally follow each other and comment on each other's tweets. This situation places activists of social movements who are not celebrities in an undesirable situation, with fewer followers and fewer engagements. Although Kwak et al. (2010) argue that social media often promotes ordinary members to become well known, only a handful of them get promoted. The majority of ordinary members of society remain at the bottom in terms of social connections. This phenomenon can be likened to the policy of BEE in South Africa, which makes a few Blacks richer whilst the majority of them languish in poverty. The BEE is considered a failed project because it only benefits a few politically connected individuals.

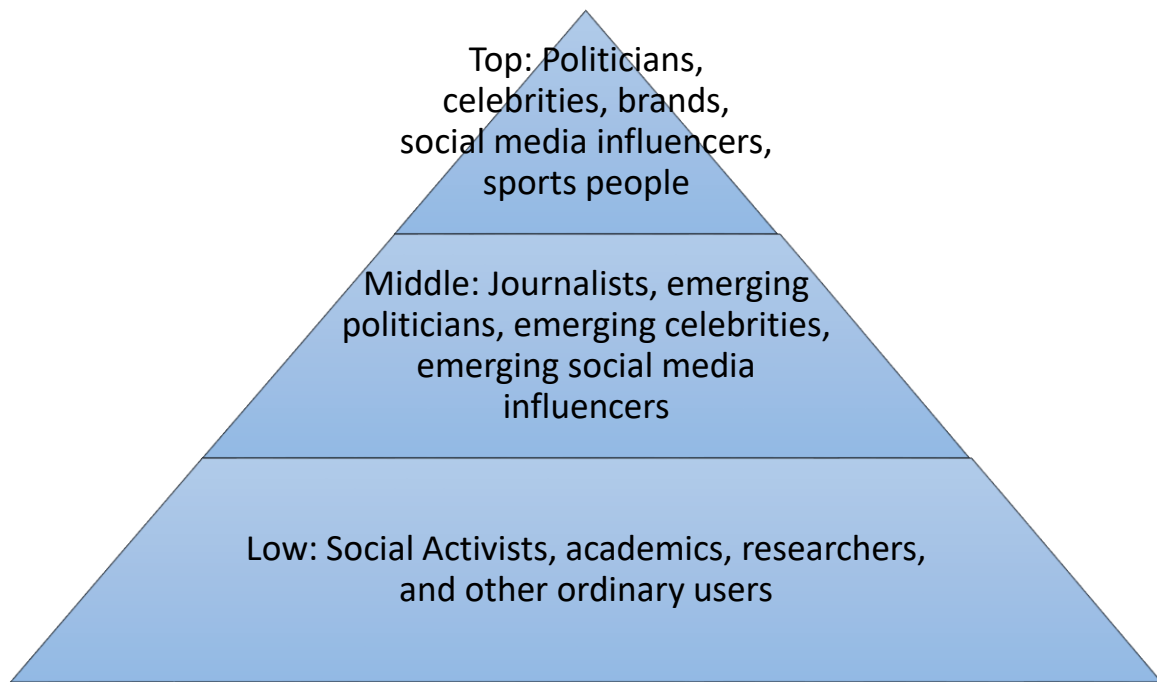


Figure 8: Social media hierarchies indicate that social media mimics real-life relationships

The above-mentioned hierarchies indicate that social media has not changed the status quo with regard to social movement activists. This demonstrates the extent to which social media is working in tandem with the original Habermas (1989) conceptualisation of the bourgeoisie public sphere. Habermas's (1989) original conceptualisation of the public sphere is applicable to a situation where the bourgeoisie are finding themselves deliberating on matters affecting the general populace. The bourgeoisie public sphere has been criticised for privileging the private citizens who are at the centre of the public sphere (Curran 2000). Figure 8 above depicts the ordinary members of society as being confined to the lowest hierarchies because social media prioritises the view of the bourgeoisie. In this hierarchy, the top echelons are reserved for the influential members of society who are mostly appropriated by the hegemony. The hierarchies illustrated in Figure 8 are a microcosm of the existing social structures within modern society. In this case, the voices of those in lower hierarchies cannot be amplified above those who occupy the top hierarchies. Clearly, social media does not close the information gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. Pre-existing inequalities are normally accelerated by social media which privileges the voices of the elites. This validates Herman and Chomsky's (2008) emphasis on the notion that the media is an instrument of the elite in terms of spreading their propaganda.

Consequently, various social movements rejected the assertion that some of their successes can be attributed to social media. Instead, they attribute their success to a lot of work being undertaken behind the scenes. Various scholars acknowledged that a lot of work is being conducted offline for the various social movements to achieve their objectives (Auoragh and Alexander 2011; Gerbaudo 2012; Gladwell 2010 and Mutsvairo 2016). Yet, in the public eye, it appears as if social media is responsible for these successes. Whilst social media has been very instrumental in the dissemination of their messages, social media is just one of many platforms that are being appropriated by social movements. Within the Social Theory tradition, social media should not be isolated from the individual agency of its users.

The other challenge is that social media does not sustain critical discussion. Although *Twitter* and *Facebook* can accommodate a lot of critical discussions, these platforms were created for the purposes of making money and fulfilling investors' desire to make profits. In this case, popular content, which has an entertainment value, is seen as befitting to the fulfilment of this financial purpose. It is not surprising to note that critical discussion does not receive adequate engagement as compared to the content of entertainment value. This is inevitable because the commercial model of social media embraces entertainment. Zuboff (2019: 10) indicated that "if it is free then you are the product." In this instance, the users of social media are treated as a commodity as well.

Due to commercialisation, social media has embraced a culture of competition. Some social media users are seen competing for likes to the extent of indebtedness and faking their lives in order to foster a sense of self-importance. This can be linked to the deception of the mass culture industry that Horkheimer and Adorno (1982) theorised about. The mechanical reproduction of beauty that is promoted by social media apps have seen some social media users faking their looks to gain more likes, shares and followers. Zuboff (2019) has identified a psychological condition known as FOMO (fear of missing out) as a challenge affecting many young people. FOMO is a form of social anxiety that is characterised by the fear that one's peers are doing far better than what one is doing. Some psychological studies have even linked the usage of social media to issues of depression and loneliness (Hunt et al. 2018). Those people who are bombarded by images of successful people on social media eventually feel hopeless

about their own lives. Social media has often been blamed for nurturing instances where users commit suicide consequent to cyber-bullying or a feeling of hopelessness. The proliferation of entertainment-driven content often impedes critical discussions that are necessary for the emancipation of people and the restoration of their hope.

### **7.10 Conclusion**

This chapter responded to the third research question that deals with the challenges that limit social media in terms of becoming an alternative media. In as much as social media is becoming an alternative space where activists of social movements can share their discourses, this study also notes the various challenges that can prevent social media from challenging the hegemony. The key challenge all the social movements noted was the issue of the digital divide. Since the social movements represent the marginalised, it is anticipated that the various kinds of the digital divide would affect these social movements. The first level of the digital divide is the material and physical divide; the second level involves skills, motivation and usage; and the third level is a special type of digital divide, which encompasses the language and cultural divide. The Post-colonial Subaltern Theory was used to explain the situation in which the voices of the marginalised are overwhelmed by the dominant voices. Apart from the digital divide, other challenges such as fake news, privacy concerns, spies, hackers, and the suppression of critical discussion also emerged. Due to the rapid commercialisation of the internet, social media has become a place where competing ideas have led to the preponderance of fake news. The next chapter discusses the ownership and control of social media and the extent to which social media ownership either suppresses or promotes social movements on social media platforms.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: THE OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL OF SOCIAL MEDIA

### 8.1 Introduction

Social movements are involved in politics and interact with social power because they fight for equitable allocation of resources, hence the need to investigate the politics of social media ownership. Historically, the media was owned by the State and its economic allies. As a result of State control and strict regulations, alternative media was necessary to check the powers of the State. However, the end of the Cold War during the 1990s signalled the beginning of a new era that saw the emergence of liberalisation, globalisation and deregulation. Kupe (2021) elaborated that it is critical to interrogate the funding and ownership of the media because this has the potential to determine the ideological direction of the media. This chapter responds to the fourth research sub-question, which seeks to unravel the ownership and control of social media, an area that is under the radar of critical studies. Therefore, this study asks crucial questions regarding whether or not social movements are conscious of the structures that own and control social media. The chapter seeks to determine the extent to which these structures may support or annihilate the efforts of social movements in emancipating the oppressed. The various activists expressed mixed reactions regarding this question, with some expressing little or no concern, whereas others were concerned about the ownership and control of social media.

### 8.2 Social media monopolies

Kupe (2021) indicated that social media has been penetrated by large media monopolies in an unprecedented manner. Whilst mergers and take-overs are good for investors with a vested interest in social media-related businesses, this tends to have a negative impact on democracy and diversity. The effects of maintaining a monopoly on social media messages are likely to be ideological. Cottle (2003: 4) highlighted that media messages “contribute to images and ideas, discourses and debates for the conduct of social relations and wider engagement of social, cultural, and political power.” In the context of this observation, it is important to note that social media texts play a pivotal role in shaping the minds and perceptions of the citizenry. The *#feesmustfall* activist also raised concerns about the monopoly characterising the ownership of social media, thus:

*The ownership of our data is something that we need to communicate, but one cannot have a conversation without the other because no one can say they are comfortable with the ownership of the media. It is this platform that we use to communicate. WhatsApp is owned by Facebook, and Facebook and Instagram are owned by Mark Zuckerberg. These monopolies are really dangerous, particularly the ways in which telecommunications companies build political messaging in the case of Cambridge Analytica, which is only making headlines because it happened in Western countries. However, the West is now going through the suffering that other countries have been going through for a long time and it goes back to the military underpinnings of the internet itself (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

Media monopoly is detrimental to democracy. The case of Cambridge Analytica, for instance, demonstrates the extent to which social media messaging can be used to overthrow governments or to win elections in politics (The Great Hack 2019). In addition, the *#feesmustfall* activist also expressed fears about the ownership of their information which can be analysed on social media through metadata.

*Basically, we are dealing with the question of ownership of land, but in this new age, we also need to understand the ownership of data and the ownership of our metadata because that is where the next frontier of inequality is going to be fought (Kalla 2020, Interviewee).*

The *Facebook* Group has recently renamed itself 'Meta', which was derived from the word metaverse (Meta 2021). Metaverse has been described as the next frontier of social relations which is blended with augmented reality, virtual reality, online gaming and crypto-currencies. The Chief Executive Officer of *Facebook*, Mark Zuckerberg, envisions a world dominated by metaverse in all spheres of social relations, including work (Meta 2021).

### **8.3 The Internet as a military tool**

The internet had its inception during the Cold War (Curran 2012). Fuchs (2017) concurs with this assertion, indicating that computers emerged during the military-industrial complex. The internet emerged as the world's then superpowers (United States and the Soviet Union) were displaying their military espionage on each other and taking control as superpowers. Curran (2012) indicated that the internet was used as a tool that fostered military command and control. Although the internet has evolved



into a commercial tool used to profiteer and commodify audiences, the *#feesmustfall* activist warned about the potential of social media as a tool for military or intelligence.

*When we look at the environment surrounding the creation of the internet as a military tool, it becomes clear that it is a tool for control and surveillance; it is a tool used by the powerful to communicate about how they are going to maintain power (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

This evidence further demonstrates that the history of the internet is inextricably linked to the military. The biggest tech companies have increased their political involvement. It is through politics that these companies are becoming influential throughout the world. Apparently, power is shifting from nationhood to transnational companies that exist across many countries. These companies are wielding an enormous amount of power; as a result of the huge revenue base they command. Hence, there is mutual power sharing between nations and transnational powers such as *Facebook* and *Google*. The war in Ukraine has shown that world powers are using new media technologies to win the support of the people. The new media technologies are so powerful that they make surveillance almost effortless. The war in Ukraine has seen powerful countries such as Russia and the US use new media technologies and mainstream media to win public support. Herman and Chomsky's (2008) propaganda model demonstrates a situation in which the media is used to spread war propaganda. Social media is not immune to the propaganda model. Social media are platforms socially created to be responsible for circulating media content considered cultural products that are subject to political and economic manipulations. The war in Ukraine has also exposed various levels of propaganda that manifest in mainstream media and social media. In addition, the earlier example of the Cambridge Analytica Project revealed that social media can be used either to overthrow legitimate governments or protect tyrannical regimes.

#### **8.4 Social media policies**

Social media are owned by private companies that are driven by the desire to make profits; hence, their policies are always orientated towards securing profits and protecting their niche in the markets. Gehl (2015) claims that social media policies are seemingly crafted in consultation with marketers and law enforcement organs rather

than users. This echoes Fuchs' (2014a) view that important decisions that are made in these companies exclude social media users who are later affected by their mediated cultural expressions. Social media policies also came into the spotlight during discussions with social movement activists. Social media companies develop a plethora of policies that determine their rules of engagement with their users. It is important to note that some of the social media policies may not be favourable to social movements. In this instance, social media policies are likely to favour social media creators, shareholders, or their political allies. A participant had this to say:

*There are always issues regarding ownership and the politics of owners; however, we have been effective in using the tool as we used it as best we could. No tool is perfect; for instance, if you want to get free Facebook credits to boost the posts, you need to comply with certain policies that regulate what may be classified as an advertisement (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee).*

Therefore, the ad policy indicates that users cannot post information that is perceived as anti-government. The interviewee added that:

*So, most of the work we do is critical of the government and that can be a hindrance, though it is not the hindrance that we then have to comply with. Then we would rather just have our posts travel organically rather than have to comply with an ad policy that we feel infringes on or inhibits our work. I think social movements are doing the best they can with these tools, as they are mindful of their limitations and policy issues of their owners. We are using social media as best we can to suit our needs and without wanting to comply with any sort of restrictions or factors that inhibit our efforts (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee).*

In this case, the social movements had to find the best way of working around social media without complying with the restrictions they imposed. This signifies the resilience of social movements in dealing with the pressure exerted by social media policies. For instance, Elon Musk wants *Twitter* to rely less on advertising because advertisers often dictate the policy of media. Elon Musk (2022) tweeted that “the power of corporations to dictate policy is greatly enhanced if *Twitter* depends on advertising money to survive.”<sup>17</sup> This is consistent with Herman and Chomsky's (2008) famous

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<sup>17</sup> Elon Musk Tweeted this statement on 9 April 2022 but deleted the Tweet after the markets reacted. As the biggest shareholder of *Twitter*, it appears that a negative reaction from the market will affect his investment negatively.

conceptualisation of advertiser-funded media, which are likely to have policies that favour conglomerate media. The previous chapter revealed that social media policies have created conditions for algorithms, short-based messages, addictive nature of social media content, behaviour-changing programmes, fake news, suppression of critical discussion and the politics of individuation.

### **8.5 Social media as a tool of the oppressor**

Policy issues also determine what social media activists should post on social media. One critical view expressed by the UPM activist is that the internet is the tool of the oppressor:

*Some of these media platforms are created by oppressors. Firstly, if you are on Facebook, raising issues that regard Black people and their problems, saying that Black people must be united or that Black people have to stand up and fight against White racism might result in you being blocked on Facebook. So, social media has its limitations. There are things that concern us that we cannot talk about on social media. For example, I think it was in 2017 or 2018 when I wrote my opinion piece explaining about how colonialism and the apartheid systems are still affecting us today. After writing that piece, I was blocked on Facebook. Firstly, they gave me a warning through my account, and when I posted the piece again, they blocked me. What I am trying to say is that we are monitored by the oppressors who are not happy when we talk about the issues that concern us as Black people (Soxujwa 2020, interviewee).*

The issue of censorship is nothing new. The previous chapter has depicted the extent to which social media can silence particular voices, simultaneously privileging specific voices. *Twitter* has introduced something called shadow-banning. Instead of completely banning a person, they let the shadow-banned person continue tweeting, though their post may not have an audience. The use of algorithms to enforce shadow-banning demonstrates the extent of subtle censorship existing on social media.

On the other side, social media have also proved to be toxic places for social movement activists. According to the BLM activist, “social media itself has become another arena where Black people are being abused” (Stephen 2015). This demonstrates that social movement activists are often faced with harassment and insults on social media when they try to address the touchy subject of race in America.

In this case, the activists had to carefully select social media content to avoid racial harassment. Social media platforms such as *Twitter* and *YouTube* are sites where many activists experience the challenge of racism and other abuses. Information overload results in social media companies failing to deal with various hate crimes that pervade social media platforms. As long as social movements rely on social media to communicate their discourses, they have to conform to social media policies.

## **8.6 Social media marginalising social movements**

Whilst social media allows anyone to express their views, getting their voice heard on social media is not guaranteed. Couldry (2010) reiterates that the long-entrenched issues of inequality are the basis on which some voices are denied or rendered illusory. The social media, which manifests in neoliberal interactions, is designed to amplify the voices of the elites. Social media companies use algorithms that prevent the marginalised social movements from projecting their voices. Social media companies avoid clearly spelling out the criteria used by the algorithm, whose eminent result is to assert popular voices and promote businesses. One of the activists of the social movements complained about the difficulties they faced getting their discourses into the public domain.

*I am sure you are aware of this development, but because Facebook changed its algorithm sometime last year<sup>18</sup>, you are more likely to see information from your friends and family than you are to see from a page such as an organisational page and it is the norm at the moment that for people to see the post on your page you ought to boost your post* (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee).

The changes in algorithms are likely to impede the free flow of information from social movements to their intended audiences. In this case, non-profit social movements are expected to boost some of their posts in order to reach their intended audiences. Although the boosted posts enable them to have more engagements and more eyeballs on their content, the boosting of posts is costly. Therefore, one has to pay *Facebook* to reach out to a specific number of audiences. This is double-dipping because *Facebook* sells the data of users, simultaneously requiring *Facebook* users to pay in order to reach out to an audience.

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<sup>18</sup> 2019
































































































Facebook Engagement Benchmarks per Industry (Average):						
						
	Fan Page Engagement Rate	Engagement Rate per Post	Engagement on Reach	No. of Posts per Day	Click-through Rate	Reactions
Global	28.3%	3.22%	0.09%	1.5	3.1%	 77.55%  15.44%  1.78%  3.19%  0.83%  1.22%
Product & Service	15.25%	1.41%	0.03%	0.86	2.45%	 67.46%  9.89%  0.88%  1.2%  0.52%  0.04%
Shopping & Retail	12.74%	0.94%	0.04%	1.18	3.17%	 80.31%  14.97%  2.01%  1.11%  0.81%  0.79%
Media & News	22.93%	1.08%	0.01%	5.61	3.13%	 79.66%  10.09%  0.81%  6.05%  2.38%  1.01%
Food & Beverage	14.35%	0.69%	0.07%	0.59	1.85%	 67.04%  18.45%  5.6%  8.75%  0.1%  0.05%
Health & Beauty	11.2%	0.8%	0.03%	0.85	2.55%	 87.16%  10.57%  1.49%  0.28%  0.44%  0.06%
Sports & Fitness	19.01%	0.58%	0.02%	0.32	13.83%	 87.88%  9.7%  1.21%  0%  1.21%  0%
Public Figures	10.22%	6.73%	0.05%	2.43	5.17%	 49.4%  45.41%  4.68%  0.42%  0.06%  0.03%
Marketing Agency	1.21%	0.93%	0.04%	0.45	8.27%	 70.05%  28.3%  1.65%  0%  0%  0%
Non-Governmental Organization	1.7%	0.26%	0.01%	0.9	4.43%	 77.88%  13.03%  1.34%  4.81%  2.71%  0.23%
Electronics	2.22%	0.18%	0.02%	0.32	3.4%	 92.74%  5.54%  1.37%  0.3%  1.21%  0.05%
App Page	18.34%	0.08%	0.03%	0.3	4.09%	 82.77%  11.73%  1.01%  3.76%  0.73%  0%
Entertainment Website	7.04%	0.09%	0.03%	3.95	2.44%	 68.05%  18.98%  5.46%  6.89%  0.51%  0.1%
Photography/ Videography	24.97%	8.29%	0.03%	0.76	3.3%	 76.18%  19.88%  0.64%  3.27%  0.03%  0%
E-Commerce Website	196.89%	0.36%	0%	1.46	2.77%	 73.95%  12.74%  0.59%  12.581%  0.04%  0.2%

Figure 9: Portrayal of NGOs throughout the world as having lower engagements (Hootsuite 2020)

Social movements represent the poor and, as expected, it is extremely difficult to mobilise the desired numbers owing to the issue of the digital divide (see Chapter 7: page 162). Evidence of fewer engagements manifested throughout the *Facebook* pages of the studied social movements. As discussed in Chapter 6, the social movements struggled to attract more reactions and engagement to their post. This finding corroborates the results of a study conducted by Poell and Borra (2011), which

confirmed that social media is not a viable platform for alternative reporting because few people participated in crowd-sourcing during the Toronto G20 protest. The fact that social movements are struggling to attract adequate engagements on their posts is also demonstrated in Figure 9 above, which depicts the non-governmental organisations which included social movements as having a lower fan page engagement rate, lower engagement rate per post, and lower engagement on reach as compared to other business-orientated sectors. This is in line with the findings of Curran (2012) who indicated that the discourses of activist groups often get lost on the internet because their statements tend to get lower search engine listings than those of corporate sites. Entertainment and commercially-driven content have proved to be a phenomenon that is promoted by social media algorithms.

### **8.7 Social media as a site of business**

The analysis of the social media accounts of social movements also revealed that social media is just another place for corporations to extract audiences and their information. Fuchs (2014a) contends that the internet is predominantly capitalist in nature. The social movements are expected to pay if they have to get their voice heard and without money, they are doomed to remain on the margin. Their visibility is often hindered by the fact that they are not using *Facebook* for profit-making. Therefore, social media is just another mainstream platform disguised as a tool of social emancipation, but in actual fact, social media platforms are in the business of selling the data of the users to potential advertisers. They use algorithms and machine learning to get to know about the interests of each consumer. This information is then used to enable advertisers to connect with their potential clients. It is in these instances that social movements are not afforded an opportunity to dominate social media spaces because their activities do not attract advertisers.

The concerns arising from the commercialisation of media are nothing new. Various scholars in the field of media and communication have raised these concerns (Bennett 2003; Gehl 2015; Herman and Chomsky 2008; Schiller 1999). Schiller (1999), for instance, has indicated that the internet has been colonised by market systems; Bennett (2003) has already raised a concern regarding the removal of political activists and minorities from the mass media coverage, and Herman and Chomsky (2008) believe that advertiser-driven media try to appeal to the advertisers before the

audiences. The era of social media, which is heavily commercialised, further amplifies this phenomenon.

Since social media owners want to expose audiences to advertisers, they created social media in such a way that makes it addictive. Curran (2012) indicated that pornography and gaming constitute the bestselling content on the internet. Many people spend many hours on social media because they are one-stop tools for entertainment, socialising, companionship, and relieving boredom. This claim is also echoed in the recently released social media documentary on *Netflix* titled 'The Social Dilemma'. The tech experts who previously worked at different social media companies such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *LinkedIn* confessed that social media was created to be a drug (The Social Dilemma 2020). A drug is metaphorically an addictive item that keeps people engaged, thus spending more time consuming it. The social media tech experts have also explained that they use algorithms and machine learning to predict the content that keeps every individual user on social media for longer periods. The tailor-made content keeps the social media users scrolling all day long.

According to Pillay (2022), the average time that South African social media users spend on these platforms is 3 hours 32 minutes per day. Therefore, South African internet users have the fourth highest average time on the internet after the Philippines, Brazil and Colombia. COVID-19, which confined people to their homes, has accelerated the rate at which people engage with their friends, family and colleagues on social media. The addictive nature of social media is linked with a lack of productivity because users tend to spend more time on social media. Various social media platforms are also competing for attention from the same users because they want returns on their investments. Clearly, the maximum engagements on these platforms make it easy for social media to maximise their revenues. The key business of social media is to extract as much revenue as possible from advertising. The longer people stay on social media, the more they get to consume various advertising content that comes in-between the content. These adverts are also tailor-made to appeal to each individual because social media companies have lots of information about their users. They know exactly when individual users are looking for a new phone, a new car or a house. In tailor-making their adverts, these companies have placed various trackers (cookies) on various websites the users visit. This is another form of subtle

exploitation that characterises the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## **8.8 Discussions and reflections**

This section is crucial in debunking the myth that social media are free from political and economic influence that characterise traditional media. The findings of this chapter attest to the fact that social media are both economic and political weapons wielded by their owners. Even though social media has been branded as transformative media as it ought to give anyone a voice, it is not without gatekeepers. Through algorithms, social media owners can decide which information appears prominently in the public domain. They can decide on which information to label as misinformation or credible. In this case, social media are entrusted with the huge responsibility of impartially enforcing communication policies. The evidence presented in this chapter thus confirms that social media are not independent of the political and economic factors that define their existence. Rather than focusing on the reductionist approach that seems to suggest that technologies are responsible for the emancipation of the oppressed, it is also recommended that there is a need to observe the social construction of technology. Technological developments are very much a subject of social construction as they cannot be explained outside of human interactions. Wherever humans are involved, fallibilities, abuse of power, and inequalities are inevitable. The Critical Political Economy Theory is very critical in its analysis of the interplay between political and economic ownership of social media. The theory, which is linked to the Marxist idea of capital accumulation, indicates that capitalist-driven inventions are not immune to exploitation and exclusions. New inventions are driven by the need to accumulate money. In this chapter, Critical Political Economy theory was used to enhance an understanding of the interplay between politics and economics in the ownership of social media.

### **8.8.1 The need for favourable government policies**

There is a mutual relationship between government and social media because social media giants need favourable government policies to access the people who constitute their markets. On the other hand, the government also gets free publicity from social media. For instance, social media have prioritised the South African government's message about COVID-19 and other important information about natural disasters. The government needs this publicity for it to stay in touch with its



citizens. For decades, governments have used the State broadcaster or public broadcaster to spread their messages and therefore win public support. In the age of new information, governments are realising the importance of social media in spreading information. In this case, the government also wants favourable social media to continue spreading its messages and to continue winning the support of the masses. Herman and Chomsky (2008) have explained this phenomenon through the propaganda model (see Section 3.2.1). It is the wish of every government to maintain a mutual relationship with all types of media in order to control the flow of messages.

As a result of the mutual relationship between social media and governments, some social media policies are inclined toward protecting the interests of these governments. The case in point relates to the *Facebook* policy which discourages the users of a free-boosted post from posting negative messages about the government. In some instances, the government can instruct social media to take down specific accounts or to reveal user details. Although some of these requests do not play out in the public domain, social media platforms do receive such requests from the intelligence community of the countries in which they operate. Zuboff (2019) indicated that *Google* and other big tech companies maintain users' search history and avail such information to intelligence communities and law enforcement agencies. In instances where the government request tech giants to reveal some personal information of users or take down specific accounts on social media, such requests are often honoured because the tech giants want favourable conditions from the same government. In India, the government requested *Twitter* to take down hundreds of accounts that criticised the government for its conduct during the farmers' protest in 2020 - 2021 (Singh 2021). India, which has the biggest social media market, is understandably respected by social media platforms because of the power that it wields. According to Statista (2021), India has 448 million social media users. Since India is the biggest social media market, the social media giants are prepared to do anything to keep that market. Singh (2021) also adds that India is ranked number five after Japan, Russia, South Korea and Turkey in terms of the number of requests for *Twitter* to remove content. Freedom of speech is likely to be affected by the actions of *Twitter* in its attempt to please various governments.

In the US, *Twitter* and *Facebook* also faced the pressure to take down the accounts

of users who were leading the Capitol Hill Protest (Singh 2021). The US's laws compelled social media to fight what was considered fake news, propaganda, and misinformation. As a result, *Twitter* and *Facebook* removed several accounts, including the *Twitter* profile of the Former US President Donald Trump because of the tweets that were allegedly fuelling a violent protest. During his tenure, former US President Donald Trump used to tweet a lot of controversial content, but *Twitter* could not block him because of the power he wielded at that time. Whilst India has the largest social media market, the US government holds considerable power because it is the richest country in the world. The success of social media companies also relies on US capitalistic ideologies and foreign policy.

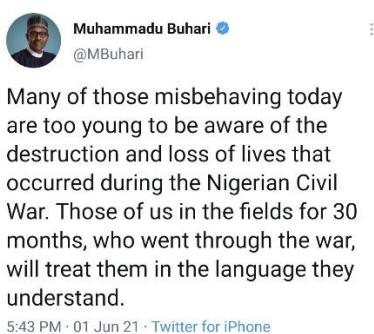
The mutual relationship between the social media giants and the government is also borne out of the respect that they both command a particular source of power. The power of social media emanates from the fact that they are global institutions that have won the hearts of the public. Even though social media are private institutions, they are increasingly playing a significant role in politics. Social media can be used to change political regimes through algorithms, artificial intelligence, and machine learning. The case of Cambridge Analytica also demonstrates the extent to which social media algorithms can be used to silence or privilege certain voices in order to achieve specific goals (The Great Hack 2019). As illustrated by Castells (2012), social media can be used to unseat repressive regimes and even legitimate governments in some instances. Zuboff (2019) has warned against a situation in which people lose their agency in terms of deciding their political fortunes. Consequently, social media can be used to spread a particular message and to paint a negative portrait of specific governments or opponents. This is particularly dangerous to democracy as these tools can be used to the detriment of other political players.

The governments, on the other side, also have their source of power as they are capable of introducing unfavourable regulations that can limit the power of social media. The governments also control the telecommunication infrastructure connecting its citizens to the rest of the world. Governments can gain control over new tech giants to maintain control over the citizenry, perform pervasive surveillance, regulate new technologies, and control the digital infrastructure (Schwab 2016; Zuboff 2019; Unwin 2012). In China, for instance, the government has exercised its control by banning

foreign sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *WhatsApp*, *Google*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube* (Chandel et al. 2019). The ban, popularly known as the Great China Firewall, has been implemented since 2008. In its attempt to avert the impending cultural imperialism, China has consequently prevented social media giants from accessing 1.5 billion Chinese users.

On the other side, the US government has proposed to ban Chinese social media companies such as *Tik-Tok* over concerns bordering on security and geo-politics (Williams 2020). The US accuses Chinese tech companies, such as Huawei, *Tik-Tok*, and *ZTE*, of spying on their citizens. This is consequent to the escalating trade war between the US and China which is centred on new technology such as 5G, augmented reality, virtual reality, and crypto-currencies. If the US succeeds in banning *Tik-Tok*, this will have some serious ramifications on democracy because, unlike China, the US considers itself a democracy.

Within the African continent, governments are slowly curtailing the power of social media. During the Arab Springs protest, the Egyptian and Libyan governments switched off the internet or specific sites the protesters used to organise the protest (Gerbaudo 2012; Alexander and Aouragh 2012). Nigeria, on the other hand, also banned *Twitter* in 2021. The decision to ban *Twitter* follows *Twitter's* decision to delete the tweet posted by the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari (now former President), for violating *Twitter* policy (The Guardian 2022).



The Buhari's Tweet which is encapsulated above was characterised as an incitement of violence by *Twitter* policies. Although the Government of Nigeria and *Twitter* agreed to reinstate *Twitter* in 2022, there are certain conditions or regulations that *Twitter* must fulfil in order to continue operating in Nigeria. If the US, India, China, Nigeria and many

other big nations can attempt to regulate social media, the other smaller governments in Africa and elsewhere are inclined towards emulating the powerhouses. Mutsvairo (2016) reiterates that repressive regimes may over-regulate or restrict social media in order to limit its power. Similar scenes were noted during the apartheid era when the apartheid government delayed the introduction of television due to fear of the perceived impact of television (Lloyd et al. 2010).

Moyo (2011) indicated that the internet embraces elitism; thus, it is not surprising that the internet in many African countries remains the preserve of the elite communities and this often helps authorities in minimising its impact. As evident in various African countries, the provision of the internet has been very slow. Political leaders do not hurriedly expand internet access because they fear the aftermath of the actions of the connected citizenry. The political establishment benefits from the ignorance of the majority who are exposed to propaganda by the State-controlled mainstream media.

Whilst the activists of social movements are considering social media spaces a creative solution where they can voice their dissatisfaction, the authority is also finding ways of clamping down on the activities of the activists (Matsilele and Ruhanya 2021; Mutsvairo 2016). Various attempts to clamp down on the protest were also noted during the *#feesmustfall* protest in South Africa. The student's movement received the highest attention from the State Security Agency in South Africa. During the testimony at the Zondo Commission, Sydney Mufamadi, the chairperson of the panel of the State Security Agency, testified that the State Security Agency infiltrated the movement in an attempt to influence the direction of the protest (Commission of Enquiry into State Capture 2022: 224).

In what was termed 'Project Academia,' the students were recruited to infiltrate the movement and spy against its leaders. The government feared the *#feesmustfall* protest would be synonymous with the Arab Spring protest. Some activists of the *#feesmustfall* movement were detained in an attempt to curtail the protest. In some instances, the South African universities were co-opted to fulfil government's agenda of suppressing the social movements. During the *#feesmustfall* protest, some universities switched off the Wi-Fi hotspots, water, and electricity in an attempt to quell the protest. Although universities in South Africa exercise their independence and freedom from politics, they are inextricably linked to the government because they are

funded by government grants and subsidies. This signifies the power that the government and powerful institutions have in delegitimising the protest. The manifestation of power that has been theorised within the political economy tradition is portrayed in this section.

### **8.8.2 The need to make money**

Social media giants have invested a lot of money in expertise, research, software, artificial intelligence, machine learning, and big data centres to store a large amount of data. Since the social media giants are privately owned, it is highly expected that they should have returns on their investments. Because social media do not require subscription fees from their users, the business model of social media is mostly advertising. Zuboff (2018: 10) indicated that “if it is free, then you are the product.” The social media giants are selling users’ data to advertisers who are looking for potential clients. This business model has raised concerns relating to privacy. Some social media users may not be comfortable when their internet-based activities are tracked by technological giants.

To make more profit, social media giants are increasingly becoming monopolised. For instance, *Facebook* has since purchased *Instagram* and *WhatsApp* in order to become a global behemoth. The media are responsible for circulating content which is a cultural product and the issue of monopoly is likely to impact this cultural product. As Zuboff (2019) indicated, social media have the potential to shape the perception of one’s world. The incidence of British Analytica<sup>19</sup>, *Facebook* contagion effects<sup>20</sup>, *Google’s* and the *Pokeman Go*<sup>21</sup> reveals that social media can be used to shape people’s views in many spheres of life. They can suppress certain political views whilst privileging other views. This demonstrates that social media can be used as a tool that advances political, economic, social, and cultural interests.

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<sup>19</sup>According to the Great Hack (2019) British Analytica is a private consultant firm that collected user’s personal information on Facebook and use for electioneering and intelligence purposes. This data was to be used to sway the public during the 2016 Presidential Election in the US.

<sup>20</sup>According to the Zuboff (2019: 299) the Facebook Contagion experiment is behavioural modification programme in which researchers manipulated voting-related content in the newsfeed of nearly 61 million Facebook users.

<sup>21</sup>According to Zuboff (2019) *Google* and *Pokeman Go* is a behavioural modification game which gets the game players checking into some places in the real world to reach their milestones. In most instances, the game will lead users to real business where they will need to purchase something to reach their milestones.

As indicated in the previous chapter, social media's global appeal is likely to erode local cultures and languages in favour of one dominant tradition. The big American corporations that promote their dominant traditions are more likely to be prioritised in the distribution of content. Popular brands such as *Coca-Cola* (107 million *Facebook* followers) and *McDonald's* (80 million *Facebook* followers) are the most visible users on social media spaces because they have the financial power to reinforce their images in the eyes of the public. This has the potential to cause what others call the McDonaldisation or Americanisation of cultures. The challenges relating to the Americanisation and Fordism of cultures are not a new topic. For instance, Gramsci's (1929) prison notes were also critical of the Americanisation and Fordism of the cultures.

The emerging trend on social media has created an environment in which businesses can flourish. Gehl (2015) indicated that the priority of social networking is more about networking between consumers and brands than networking between peers. For instance, businesses have a *Twitter* or *Facebook* version that allows them to perform advanced functionalities. In some instances, businesses can automatically send replies or private messages to anyone who comments on or likes their status. Some businesses use bots to read the comments of potential clients and try to respond to the matter at hand. These advanced functionalities, which are promoted by artificial intelligence and machine learning, are only available to institutions that have financial resources. The new owner of *Twitter*, Elon Musk has introduced the *Twitter Blue* initiative in which users should pay \$8 to have the blue verification tag, to post longer videos and have their content prioritised in searches, replies, or mentions. This initiative is aimed at putting paying subscribers at the centre of the *Twitter* sphere. Free flow of information will be hampered by *Twitter* algorithms that prioritise paying customers. Social movement activists and organisations that cannot afford these advanced functionalities are likely to remain at a margin.

Apart from being orientated toward marketers, social media is also designed in such a way that it promotes dominant ideas. In this case, the voices of the less powerful can be excluded because they do not have the political and economic power to sway public opinions. As Cottle (2003: 4) put it, "the voice of the marginal and dispossessed society also struggles for the media spotlight to draw their plight, with noticeably less

success.” Although this quotation was conceptualised before the dawn of social media, these practices continue to manifest in the era of new media. Curran (2000: 132) alluded to the notion that the reason behind the suppression of marginal voices is that mass media markets (which include social media) “are orientated toward the majorities as a way of maximising the sales and economics of scale.” This phenomenon is likely to cause subtle censorship.

The social media giants are involved in subtle censorship because the voices of those with financial muscles are more likely to feature in the public sphere. For instance, *Facebook* has taken steps towards limiting the reach of *Facebook* pages in an attempt to prioritise content shared between family and friends. This means that *Facebook* users are more likely to see the content from friends and family rather than from the *Facebook* pages. This has a significant impact on those who run *Facebook* pages for social movements since their stories do not reach out to most of their intended recipients. The only option for those who run the *Facebook* pages of social movements is to start boosting their pages, though at a cost. This is seen as an injustice for social movements that survive on grants and donations, as they cannot reach many of their followers. Quite often, these social movements are likely to use grants and donations to pay for essentials or assist their vulnerable members with food.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this discussion is that objectivity is far-fetched when mega-corps such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* are entrusted with the power to decide on what should appear before the public. The concentration of power in the hands of private entities or individuals often results in the abuse of power by these companies because they are not accountable to anyone other than their board of directors or shareholders. This is also demonstrated by the UPM activist who was suspended by *Facebook* for merely posting his ideas about apartheid (Soxujwa 2020, Interviewee). As Fuchs (2010) indicated, alternative media should consider alternative distribution formats. Disseminating alternative discourses on social media that are owned by big corporations is not an ideal situation in an era where censorship, spying, and rapid commercialisation are at an advanced stage.

### **8.8.3 The need for citizens**

Access to social media has made it possible for citizens to participate in the public

sphere. The ICT Policy (2016) also emphasises the need to harness ICT opportunities. Whilst it is true that access to social media can bring with it many opportunities such as an informed citizenry, regulators across the world are finding themselves in a difficult position. The social media giants are finding themselves having to strike a balance between the needs of the citizens, the need to appease the governments, and the need to make money.

It is important to note that for social media to be successful, they ought to have the buy-in of the citizens. A people-centred social media has to gratify the needs of the citizens by making them informed, entertained, and educated. Since its inception, *Facebook* has kept families and friends connected. The ability of social media to connect friends and family, get information, and obtain breaking news stories has seen social media winning the hearts of many users. On the other hand, *Twitter*, which is a microblogging service, keeps people informed about the events and breaking news happening around them. Social media allows ordinary people to also make breaking news.

In South Africa, 25 million people have access to social media networks (Statista 2021). Almost every company or organisation has social media accounts where they can interact with their clients and followers. Social movements also seek to connect with their followers on social media. The users should play a big role in shaping their own experience of social media. For instance, the users have successfully requested *Twitter* to increase the characters per tweet and also requested *Facebook* to have the edit button and to introduce various reactions to statuses. To retain users, social media constantly need to fulfil their need for information, entertainment and education. Although the users are central to the survival of social media, the tech giants are corporates determined to turn the audience into saleable commodities. The relationship between social media and their users does not stop with satisfying the audience's need for entertainment, education, or information. They also need favourable government policies in order to continue dominating the markets.

The previous sections have demonstrated that social media platforms are mainly driven by the twin objectives of making money and appeasing the political authorities. In some cases, social media often make decisions that can instigate a massive exodus of users. For instance, in India, the events that led to the suppression of many social



media accounts of those who were participating in the Farmers Protest had also seen many people in that country threatening to leave *Twitter* if the blocked accounts were not reinstated. Due to massive public pressure, *Twitter* was forced to rescind its decision (Singh 2021). These are the types of situations that often put social media giants between a rock and a hard surface. However, the social media behemoth can become egotistical in some instances due to its monopolistic characteristics.

According to Fuchs (2017), *Facebook* represents a unique monopolistic characteristic that makes it difficult for users to have a choice. For instance, the change in *WhatsApp* policies has resulted in many users threatening to leave *WhatsApp*. Due to its monopoly, *Facebook* owns four out of the five top social media platforms – *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Messenger*, and *WhatsApp*. If a person leaves *WhatsApp* and joins *Messenger*, it is not a loss for social media giants. The dangers of media concentration have been noted by various scholars such as Bagdikian (2007), Berger (2004), Herman and Chomsky (2008) and Kupe (2021). The danger of conglomerates, according to Bagdikian (2007: 4), lies in their ability to use their formidable power to lobby the government and focus more on profit rather than issues of public interest. Most of the decisions and policies implemented by the owners, board of directors or private shareholders are motivated by the need to make money. For instance, the new owner of *Twitter*, Elon Musk has made drastic decision within a short period of time in an attempt to get the return on his investment. Such decision involved retrenching half of *Twitter* staff members, introducing long hours, removing the board members, charging for verification tag, reversed suspension of certain *Twitter* accounts such as Donald Trump, auctioning some of the equipment, stopped paying rent at *Twitter* headquarters and introducing the *Twitter Blue* initiative without due consideration. Since he paid \$44 billion (R776 billion) to buy *Twitter*, the policies of *Twitter* are supposed to favour himself and his investors rather than users. A people-centred social media should involve its users in its technological designs, setting standards, and making of policy.

## **8.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an analysis of the ownership and control of social media and the extent to which such ownership allows social movements to challenge the

hegemony. Within the field of Media Studies, the issues of ownership and control are very important in the flow of ideas. This chapter, which was in response to the third research sub-question, has proved that the shift from State ownership of media to private ownership during the 1990s has not provided any reprieve for social movements in their quest for alternative media. The evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that social media, which are privately owned, have not changed the status quo for social movements. The social movements continue to seek relevance and validation from social media that prioritise monetary value over issues of public interest. Social media are owned by monopolies that specialise in selling the data of users to advertisers to make profits. The evidence also indicates that commercially-driven media are responsible for suppressing marginal voices. Analysts such as Zuboff (2019) have raised serious concerns relating to issues such as privacy and surveillance capitalism. Apart from surveillance capitalism, the internet giants are also increasing their roles in politics. The history of the internet, which can be linked to military tools developed during the Cold War, demonstrates that the internet is inextricably linked to politics. Social media owners require favourable government policies for them to pursue and achieve their economic goal, which is to make a profit. The government, on the other side, also requires good social media that can communicate their messages to their constituencies. In some instances, favourable social media can help governments stay in power through surveillance, espionage, and suppression of dissenting views. The case study of Cambridge Analytica and the study conducted by Zuboff (2019) were drawn into the discussion to demonstrate the power and influence of social media in politics. The Critical Political Economy Theory has been used to contextualise the mutual relationship between government and social media and the ramifications that this has for the consumers of these technologies. The next section examines an ideal situation that sustains alternative media in the digital age.

## **CHAPTER NINE: TOWARD THE BLENDED APPROACH: RE-INTEGRATING SOCIAL MEDIA WITH TRADITIONAL ALTERNATIVES**

### **9.1 Introduction**

The preceding chapters have revealed the opportunities and challenges of social media as an alternative media in the digital age. It has also been noted that social media is a great tool that facilitates the advancement of alternative reporting, but it has its own shortcomings regarding challenging the existing power structures. As Kalla (2020, interviewee) indicated, social media “is definitely not a silver bullet; it is not going to solve all the problems.” This chapter responds to the fifth research sub-question, which seeks to investigate the survival tactics of alternative media in the digital age. Therefore, this chapter introduces a blended approach to alternative media. As such, alternative media should continue representing a diversity of voices, empower the subalterns, and play a crucial role in the development process. The blended approach introduced in this chapter should take into consideration both traditional and new media in advancing alternative media in the digital age.

### **9.2 Social media supplements traditional alternatives**

Within the South African context, the “old media is not yet dead whilst the new media is not yet born” (Kupe 2021). What this entails is that it is not yet time to write an ‘obituary’ for some of the old media. Unlike Castells (2004) who believed that new information technology is a revolution that will replace the current communication system, the emerging scholarly view from Van Dijk (2012) has taken an evolutionary approach, which believes that new technologies are gradually evolving out of old ones. A study conducted by Chiumbu (2012) also noted that mobile phones amplify the traditional methods of mobilisation. In this study, the social activists also advance the belief that social media supplements the traditional alternatives.

Whilst there is a lot of hysteria about the benefit of social media in enabling the marginalised to participate in the informational economy, the activists in the *#feesmustfall* protest had some reservations regarding social media. A participant had this to say:

*I think you can start a hashtag on social media and you can use it as a tool to*

*communicate a message and to share your work, which has to be on the ground especially if you are working with marginalised people. The digital divide can never allow anyone to actually do everything on social media, but you can use it to get support, build credibility and get resources and, more importantly, to get media attention. So, basically you use it as a tool for messaging to build support and legitimacy for your movement and to share what your work is about. However, the actual hard work needs to be happening on the ground. So, in planning for #feesmustfall we had printed thousands of pamphlets, we had put out posters and stayed up late at night talking to students in the libraries, going to residences and having conversations with committees. Building consensus and building support the hard way and social media aided us to get further message across and to communicate with those whom we have already convinced with our message rather than putting up a few tweets and getting them trending (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

The #feesmustfall activist also emphasised that social media were mainly used to reinforce the message to reach a wider audience. A participant said:

*That is where social media comes in to reinforce the message. It was seldom that students would see things first on social media. However, social media was by far the widest-reaching tool; we can communicate with our students' base, given that the university did not allow the Students' Representative Council (SRC) to send their communication directly to students (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

The #feesmustfall movement had dual task teams which included the traditional mobilisations and the social media based team (Kalla 2020, interviewee). These dual task teams worked together to get the message across to their constituencies. Kalla (2020, interviewee) said "we used social media to reach people who we could not reach physically and communicate with those people whom we have already brought into the fore." In this case, social media was used on a complimentary basis. This entails that the traditional methods of mobilisation such as pamphlets, posters, SMS (Short Message Service), and physical contacts such as door-to-door and face-to-face also played an important role in distributing the message. The #feesmustfall activist also indicated that they even developed their own email database to rival the university database that students could not easily access (Kalla 2020, interviewee).

On the other side, the LPM activist also indicated that they integrated a variety of communication methods in a supplementary approach. Mthombeni (2020,

interviewee) indicated that “we also resort to other forms of media which we feel the target audience will get the message.” In this case, the integration of communication methods enabled them to speak to different audiences at the same time. However, the activist also indicated that they used social media mainly because it was “cheap and fast” (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee). Social media represents an alternative and simple way of communicating with those who are connected. Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) also encourages those who are connected to spread the word to those who are not connected. Nonetheless, it was also emphasised that LPM often resort to other forms of media to meet various target audiences. For instance, if they wanted the attention of the Minister of Water and Sanitation, they realised that the best way of getting the Minister’s attention is to send their press report to a journalist who will publish the story in the big media. Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) indicated that they did not get the Minister’s attention if they used social media or community radio. This portrays the extent to which one has to employ various media platforms to reach the target audiences.

### **9.3 The local and community media factor**

Various scholars have emphasised the role of community media in disseminating the counter-hegemonic alternative content (Bailey et al. 2008; Kupe 2007; O’Sullivan et al. 1998; Tyali 2017). This section reveals how various social movements engage with local media in their activism. These local media such as community radio and newspapers are cited as the most favourable places that effectively get the message to their audience. Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) indicated that the most accessible type of media is the local or community radio. Jansen-Thomas (2020, interviewee) also added that the EE, which is a youth-led social movement, wants to talk to the communities where its members hail from, in the language that they understand. In this case, community radio, which encompasses radio stations broadcasting in a number of vernacular languages, is very effective in reinforcing the message to its members. The mandate of the community radio station is to speak to the issues that affect the local community in the languages that are accessible in that community.

ABM activist also reported that they rely on alternative media because the mainstream media has allegedly rejected them for political reasons. Zikode (2020, interviewee)

indicated that some journalists bankrolled by mainstream media confessed to him that they were banned from entertaining *Abahlali*. However, alternative media, such as community radios and local newspapers, have been reliable to *Abahlali*. The UPM, on the other side, commended the coverage that they had been receiving from the public broadcaster, *SABC*, though they reportedly had an ambivalent relationship with some local community newspapers. The interviewee said:

*Some local newspapers, you know, are captured. They do not even bother to publish our stories because they know that publishing these stories exposes the people who are in charge. You see, these media houses are one of the problems hindering our road to emancipation; you have to know that some of them have been captured by these political fellows* (Soxujwa 2020, interviewee).

For reasons cited in the narrative cited above, Soxujwa appreciates the role of the *SABC* and other media establishments in making the world see the condition of people's lives in the 'so-called democracy'. With considerable emphasis, Soxujwa (2020, interview) said, "we have to tell the world that we are not free and that 1994 did not change anything." Whilst other interviewees commended the community media for prioritising the issues that affect the community, the UPM activist has a complicated relationship with the community newspapers which they perceive as having been captured by politicians.

#### **9.4 Online alternative media platforms**

Atton (2002a) has investigated online alternative media and noted some success they have attained. The emergence of new media also came with a lot of alternative media platforms that report on social justice matters. Such online alternative media platforms focus on topics that are ignored by the mainstream media. Since it is often difficult for many social movements to get their messages accessed by the public, the movements are acknowledging the involvement of online alternative publications. The interviews and social media analysis revealed that online publications such as *The Daily Maverick*, *Daily Vox*, *New Frame*, and *GroundUp* have been championing social justice. For instance, the *#feesmustfall* activist indicated that:

*A digital publication called the Daily Vox played quite a big role during the #feesmustfall protest and the protest at Wits was widely covered. We got coverage from various media sources, but it was not always accurate. That's where we could use the*

*alternative sources to try and set the record straight because they were a lot more sympathetic to the cause and a lot more student-centred in their reporting than the mainstream media. In this particular instance, I am referring to the Daily Vox, though there were others. There were publications where we could send our op-ed<sup>22</sup> and those kinds of things like the Daily Maverick. And, we were able to use social media and our own profiles on social media to share our personal experiences and that was very well-received by the public (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

This view is also supported by Jansen-Thomas who indicated that “there are some traditional media outlets which are committed to reporting on social justice and structural issues.” In this case, Jansen-Thomas expressed appreciation for the support they got from the journalists who championed their struggle. Realistically, it will not be possible for the media to cover all stories because so much is happening in South Africa. Even though there is a competition for ideas and airtime, publications such as *GroundUp* and *The Daily Maverick* stand out as champions of the poor as “they put a lot of effort and space into giving voices to the marginalised people and make sure that South Africans hear their experiences” (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee). During the analysis of the pages of the social movements, publications such as *GroundUp*, *Daily Vox*, and *New Nation* also reported on the activities of the social movements. Whilst these media platforms are performing an important function, they need to be protected against commercial elements. Since the 1990s, alternative titles have been disappearing due to commercial pressures, and local community newspapers have been taken over as well. Fuchs (2014a) has also demonstrated that successful alternative media titles are often snatched by private capital. The case in point has been the *Huffington Post*, which was bought by AOL, a global conglomerate. The *Huffington Post* is now part of the mainstream agenda. In the South African context, local community titles that are successful or profitable are often taken by established media players. For instance, around 140 community newspapers in South Africa are owned by Caxton Group, which is one of the big four media groups. The potential for diversity and pluralism is eroded when many community newspapers are owned by a single conglomerate. Classic scholars such as Horkheimer and Adorno (1982) have already raised concern about media monopoly which leads to a mass

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<sup>22</sup> Op-ed means opposite the editorial page. Daily Maverick allows various individuals to send their opinion pieces to their publication.

culture that is identical.

### **9.5 The success of social movement attributed to social media**

Various scholars have already claimed that the success of social movements can be attributed to social media (Castells 2012; Shirky 2008; Mason 2012). Similar views were echoed by journalists and commentators during the *#feesmustfall* and *#Rhodesmustfall* protests. In spite of being a popular view, it lacked scientific and scholarly backing. Gerbaudo (2012) believes that a successful social movement should be able to coordinate its affairs both online and offline. Whilst the activist agrees that social media was helpful in their campaigns, the success of their movement cannot be solely attributed to social media. The *#feesmustfall* activist acknowledged that “social media has a multiplier effect, so it enables you to reach more people quickly, to get your message across much faster and to contend what is happening in the media” (Kalla 2020, interviewee); however, a lot of work had to be done on the ground to pave the way for a successful campaign.

On the other hand, Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) indicated that the success of their social movement is attributable to various communication strategies that they adopted. As previously indicated, they integrated a variety of communication methods to reach out to various target audiences. Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) also indicated that they had recorded some notable success in the area of land reform, but social media was not there when the movement started in 2001. The emergence of social media has enabled them to send their communication faster and cheaper. Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) indicated that issues of land reforms are suddenly in the public domain and many political parties have since adopted their stance.

*You can see now, we are speaking the same language as the government. There is expropriation without compensation; we are realising that those are the things we committed ourselves to in Bloemfontein when we launched the Landless People's Charter (Mthombeni 2020, interviewee).*

Zikode (2020, interviewee) also indicated that they ran a successful campaign on social media where they designed posters and pamphlets which they circulated without having to print them. The response rate attested to the effectiveness of the campaign, especially amongst young people.



*We have seen this campaign working very effectively when we made posters and pamphlets and started circulating them. The messages and responses that we received in the past indicate that this can be an effective campaign. However, as I have said, not everyone has access especially older people who are still stuck in other modes of communication than social media (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

This demonstrates some of the capabilities of social media in circulating the messages around. On the other hand, Soxujwa (2020, interviewee) demonstrated that social media should not be seen as a place where they can safely communicate because their stumbling block on their way to emancipation will see their communication. After the UPM had won their case against Makhanda Municipality, Soxujwa (2020 interviewee) indicated that they were now considered a dangerous movement and they encountered a lot of stumbling blocks within their campaigns. This entails that they not only use social media to publicise themselves but also travel around the country mobilising young people.

On the other side, Jansen-Thomas (2020, interviewee) indicated that as much as social media is part of their success, they cannot entirely attribute their success to it.

*I think that social media works best when it reflects on a range of activities. So, when we are having actions like protests or a picket, then that gets reflected on social media. I do not believe in campaigns that are purely social media-driven. I believe that our success is reflected in what we are doing on the street and on the ground in terms of activism and we are using social media to complement that (Jansen-Thomas 2020, interviewee).*

The views presented above demonstrate that social media alone is not capable of bringing about successful campaigns. The activists interviewed in this study indicated that their successful campaign is a result of the integration of a variety of communication methods and a lot of work happening on the ground. This is contrary to the revolutionist view which considered technology to be emancipatory. Therefore, the revolutionary view is rendered flawed due to its lack of account of human agency in analysing the relationship between technology and society.

## **9.6 Towards a sustainable model of alternative media in the digital era**

Having looked at the opportunities and challenges that characterise social media as

alternative media, this section aims to advance various ideas in recommending sustainable alternative media in the digital era. Undoubtedly, social media represents the most advanced way of communication globally, but it is far from ideal. The findings presented in the previous section indicate that social movements continue to be marginalised by the prevailing media system. Whether it is the traditional media or new media, the social movements continue to be treated as outcasts due to their ideological preconceptions. However, the new era of social media has placed itself as a better alternative because it enables multiple voices, interactivity and allows the users to challenge the dominant power systems. This has also seen social media manifesting itself as a democratic, revolutionary, or emancipatory media. Whilst the extent to which social media is democratic, revolutionary, or emancipatory has been a subject of debate in academic circles, it remains a perplexing medium that can be understood through an array of research traditions. There is a need for constantly stimulating debates on how to strengthen social media and its accessibility.

In an attempt to propose a sustainable model of social media as alternative media, the researcher asked the social activist about what could be done to ensure that social media empowers the voiceless. The answers to this question will help the researcher to develop a sustainable alternative media appropriate to the digital conundrum. The desirable type of alternative media should ensure that the best interest of the disenfranchised in society is represented without frontiers.

#### **9.6.1 De-commercialisation and de-politicisation of social media**

Although social movements can use social media to fight for better allocation of resources which entails politics, the involvement of politicians or powerful individuals in social media ownership is not welcomed. To understand the multifaceted concept of politics, the ABM activist distinguished between mainstream party politics and people's politics or living politics. Zikode (2020 interviewee) indicated that:

*ABM is a political social movement in the sense that the questions that we are raising are political in nature. However, we are not aligned to any political parties and we distinguish between party politics and people's politics or rather living politics. The politics that even 'mama no gogo'<sup>23</sup> can understand at home, the politics that talk to*

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<sup>23</sup>Mothers and grannies

*their immediate needs; this is the politics of water, housing and other amenities. That is the type of politics that Abahlali has framed as a living politics or the people's politics – it is very different from your mainstream party politics which speaks to the position of power of who gets tender or who gets elected to senior positions of power. Yes, we are in politics but not party politics, though of course, we do engage political parties (Zikode 2020, interviewee).*

Based on the above explanation of politics, it is now plausible to establish what de-politicisation of social media entails. In simple terms, the de-politicisation of social media entails that social media should not be in the hands of politicians who will use it to fulfil their narrow political goals which are guided by the pursuit of power. Although social media can be used by social movements to fight for a better allocation of resources, the ownership and control of social media should not be appropriated by powerful individuals. This study demonstrated that governments and politicians want to seize control of social media for purposes of surveillance, suppressing dissent voices and maintaining control over people.

On the other hand, social media should also be de-commercialised. As Schiller (1999) pointed out, the internet, which is driven by the advertising model, is deepening consumerism amongst privileged groups. This corroborates the results of the social media analysis performed in this study, which revealed that social media is a space that promotes entertainment-driven content and consumerism. This revelation is also backed by scholars in the field of Media and Cultural Studies who argue that commercially driven media are more likely to promote the ideas of the powerful at the expense of the marginalised (Cottle 2003; Curran 2003; Herman and Chomsky 2008). In a world dominated by the free market and capitalist economic system, it is not coincidental that the dominant social media platforms wield so much power.

One of the challenges that have been identified by social movement activists is that social media controlled by commercial giants hardly address the interests of the disenfranchised members of society. The social media behemoths that seek profit have been proven to be perpetuating injustice for the poor. Many scholars have seen the potential for social media to extend democratic processes and self-determination (Castells 2012; Shirky 2008; Kamp 2016). While this potential is there, the accent appears to be business as usual.

According to Zikode (2020, interviewee), social media “should not be controlled by big corporates and rich individuals.” On the other hand, social media should not be regulated by the authorities as such action might allow politicians to use it as a political tool to silence dissent voices (Zikode 2020, interviewee). In this case, social media should be democratised and constitutionalised to ensure that it respects individuals’ right to privacy. Zikode (2020, interviewee) also concluded that social media should remain free for everyone; it should not be another money-making scheme as this excludes other potential users based on economic grounds. This recommendation resonates well with Gehl’s (2015) idea of adopting alternative social media to counter corporate social media.

On the other side, the *#feesmustfall* activist also indicated the need to start questioning the commercial model of the communication infrastructure.

*We envision a future where internet companies are run in the interest of the public and not that of profit making because that is going to be essential in dealing with the digital divide. And I think it could enhance our active online resources, our ability to communicate about what is fundamentally wrong in society, about service delivery in our communities and our ability to confront people who are corrupt (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

This demonstrates that the internet is considered a human rights issue as it is crucial in imparting and receiving information. However, Kalla (2020, interviewee) also indicated that the “internet is not a silver bullet; hence, it is not going to solve all human problems.” As much as access to the internet is a basic human right, the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty, and inequality need to be addressed urgently. Access to the internet should be accompanied by access to other basic rights such as shelter, water, food, and dignity. Access to the internet alone cannot bridge the digital divide since this phenomenon exists at various levels such as linguistic, geographical and cultural levels (Moyo 2018; Ragnedda and Muschert 2018; Van Dijk 2018; Wa Thiong’o 1993). The culture and languages of those who created the internet are highly represented on social media. The next section dwells on the notion that the decentralisation of social media embraces the diversity of ideas and pluralism.

### 9.6.2 Decentralisation of the internet

The internet is becoming essential to everyday life as it enables people to communicate, socialise, work, shop, bank and do research through online platforms. Kalla (2020 interviewee) indicated that there are lots of benefits that people can harness through access to the internet.

*Access to the internet just allows people to communicate the challenges that they encounter. Right now we are experiencing a lockdown, and if you cut your means of communicating with your family over the phone or WhatsApp because you do not have data, that really touches your entire existence because people are social beings. If you are not going to report gender violence, or if you are not able to go into the website and report something that happened or if you are not able to raise your voice on something on social media, then that silences you in the world that you are currently in and I think that access to the internet should be a basic right (Kalla 2020, interviewee).*

Although the internet is central to the digital age, the centralisation of social media has proven to be problematic as it concentrates the power of social media ownership in the hands of a few. The power of social media is in the hands of a few corporations, such as *Google*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*, which has severe ramifications for participatory citizenship and the proliferation of alternative ideas. The structure of social media, which is highly monopolised, has resulted in various scholars doubting the democratic role of social media (Curran 2012; Fuchs 2014a; Unwin 2012; Zuboff 2019). As discussed in the previous chapter, the concentration of the ownership of social media will adversely impact the diversity of ideas. Zuboff (2019) has discussed the extent to which social media is becoming more coercive and costing us human nature. Through algorithms, social media ownership can control people by promoting certain ideas at the expense of others.

A more decentralised form of social media that is not controlled by the government and big corporates manifests as an ideal remedy. This ideal form of the internet should be able to evade political control which has reduced the internet into a mere surveillance tool or an instrument for silencing dissent voices. Fuchs (2014a) believes that non-commercial internet projects, such as Wikipedia and Diaspora, have created a conducive environment for participatory culture to thrive. These open-source

projects are proving to be effective since they are decentralised.

In advancing the alternative form of the internet, Unterberger and Fuchs (2021) have proposed the Public Service Media and Internet (PSMI) manifesto. This proposed shape of the internet ought to address the imperatives of fairness, equality, participation, and civic dialogue (Unterberger and Fuchs 2021). The manifesto mainly aims to deal with the challenge of the commercialisation of the internet, which has resulted in the internet taking on a centralised shape. However, this proposed manifesto is drawn from the Westernised ideals where the public service media has enjoyed greater success due to its autonomy. In this instance, it is important to pay attention to the fact that public service media in many African countries have not registered a major success. Various scholars, such as Berger (2011) and Moyo and Mutsvairo (2018), have already warned about prescribing theories, epistemologies and best practices that may not be applicable to the African context. It is important for the African scholarly community to play a role in finding sustainable solutions to the problem of the centralisation of the internet which threatens democracy, freedom of expression and the proliferation of alternative ideas.

### **9.6.3 Localisation of new technological inventions**

The localisation of technologies is an important move towards empowering local cultures, languages and traditions. Mpofu-Walsh (2021) believes that the concentration of power that lies outside the borders of South Africa has serious ramifications for democracy. The agenda-setting is now decided in Silicon Valley (California, United States), by institutions or individuals that are not democratically elected. This may undermine local efforts such as transforming the media landscape, nation-building and development. In addition, Bagdikian (2007), who is an outspoken critic of media concentrations, has indicated that the internet age which ignores national boundaries has caused some less-developed countries and large ethnic groups to feel alienated by social media firms that reflect the culture and attitudes of the industrialised nations. Localised media is a necessity because it empowers local cultures, languages and traditions. The government is also able to achieve its sustainable development goals through localised media which speaks to issues of local development.

The idea of localising technological inventions was strongly supported by the UPM

activist. Soxujwa (2020, interviewee), who is inspired by Steve Biko, expressed the following:

*The great Steve Biko once said that anything that you want to do or anything you want to change; we have to do it by ourselves. So, if the oppressor creates a platform for you to communicate you must know that such a platform is not safe for you* (Soxujwa 2020, interviewee).

In this case, Soxujwa (2020, interviewee) believed that the new imagined platform is capable of creating an atmosphere of trust and they will be able to express themselves without fear. He further calls on academics, researchers, and visionaries to make this idea possible. The envisioned platform should also take into consideration the cultural and socio-economic conditions of the inhabitants of South Africa. The calls for localising cultural productions are also supported by scholars such as Traverso (2021) who highlighted that the subalterns cannot conquer power or transform the relations of production without establishing their own cultural industries.

As Castells (1998) indicated, the culture of the internet is the culture of its creators. Social media are American institutions that have their foundation in neoliberalism and capitalism. As such, social media are duty-bound to protect the systems that sustain them. Horkheimer and Adorno (1982) have also demonstrated that the success of the culture industry emanates from the general laws of capital. In their current form, social media reflect Western values and belief systems. Thus, these technological inventions were not created with an African culture or language in mind but those of the West.

For instance, the default language on social media or the internet, in particular, is English and many other European languages. The default status of English is also observed by Dalvit (2018) who states that English is entirely used in new media. The emerging trend on social media has also seen some of the South African languages being translated to English. This ensures that almost every text posted on social media is available in English. This is seen as a courtesy to assist English speakers in understanding everything that happens on social media. There is no translation from English<sup>24</sup> to African languages because English is treated as a default language. In

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<sup>24</sup>The exception in this case is Google Translate which has symmetrical translations between English and selected African languages. However, the quality of translations is far from being good.

some instances, translation often happens between European languages such as Spanish and French, but there is no translation between African languages such as Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga. This asymmetrical relationship between languages solidifies the place of English and other European languages as global languages. In this case, Wa Thiong'o (1993) has already warned that the new technologies perpetuate neo-colonialism. Soxujwa (2020, interviewee) believed that a home-brewed social media platform should be able to instil African pride where dissenting voices will not be censored. Such a platform should be people-centred in its creation and its operations.

## **9.7 Discussions and reflections**

The history of alternative media has already revealed that communities have relied on oral and traditional methods of communicating their discourses. For instance, the ancient African communities used drums, songs and arts to communicate. The findings of this study reveal that social movements continue to use various methods of communicating and voicing their discontent. Ancient methods of communication, such as singing, music, dance and chants, are still being used by social movements to voice their struggles. The arrival of social media and many other online platforms has presented more opportunities for social movements to voice their concerns.

The study further suggests the possible ways in which social movements can use social media to their advantage. Since the advent of new media, a variety of electronic based platforms have been used to advance alternative reporting. Although many platforms exist, there is no guarantee that they are effective in disseminating alternative discourses to challenge hegemony. The evidence presented in the previous chapters demonstrates the proliferation of too many competing ideas on social media.

In this highly competitive environment, it is doubtful that the emancipation of the less dominant groups can be done by commercially driven social media. Social movements must adopt various platforms and stop relying solely on social media to disseminate their alternative discourses. The idea of adopting a variety of platforms was also supported by the activists (interviewees). The interviewees concurred with the notion that social media cannot reach everyone due to the digital divide. Since the social movements are grassroots movements, they disseminate their alternative discourses



using a variety of platforms, such as posters, face-to-face communication, SMSes, and traditional media. Social media is also part of the communication mix. This demonstrates that social media is just one of the many platforms adopted by social movements. In this case, the proposition that social movements can use social media to challenge the hegemony is not convincing. During the *#feesmustfall* protest, for instance, some universities switched off the internet connection, but the protest continued offline. Similar incidences where the authorities switched off the internet were the Arab Springs protest and recently, the Farmers' protest in India. However, during the Arab Springs protest, these regressive actions did not thwart the protest as the protesters continued mobilising offline (Gerbaudo 2012). All the activists (interviewees) indicated that social media is simply complementing the established methods of communication.

Although many analysts such as O'Sullivan (2009), Smith (2010), and Castells (2012) hold the view that social media are causing revolutions, the social movements activists acknowledged human agency. The *#feesmustfall* activist did not see social media activities as isolated events but as a broader part of activities that involved mobilisation and organising skills (Kalla 2020 interviewee). In this case, she believed that the success of their movement was largely attributable to their organising and mobilising skills. Part of this broad scheme involved both electronic and traditional communication methods. These socially constructive ideas were also supported by Gerbaudo (2012) who analysed the Arab Springs protest. The evidence from *#feesmustfall* activists also suggests that the protest received coverage from both mainstream and alternative media groupings. However, the coverage that they received from mainstream media groups was often skewed towards the dominant narrative. Consequently, social media platforms were used to challenge the negative narrative reported by the mainstream media.

Curran (2012) noted that social media has been driven by a celebratory discourse that only focuses on its bright side. However, the discussion presented in the previous chapters demonstrates that social media has its fair share of challenges that are likely to impact its emancipatory role. The findings reveal that social media is not very different from traditional mainstream media in terms of its *modus operandi*. The traditional mainstream media always claimed to be inclusive and objective, but neither

did it cover the issues of the marginalised in great depth nor with precision, if at all. The arrival of social media has not changed the status quo, as the platform is also responsible for amplifying the dominant voices. This view is supported by Herman and Chomsky's (2008) propaganda model, which portrays the dominant elites as using the media to brainwash the masses and win over the electorates. In this case, the celebrities, the media, politicians, social media influencers and big corporates are responsible for setting the agenda on social media. The mainstream media, on the other side, also sets the agenda for inclusion and exclusion because the large number of fans follows their social media pages. This entails that the mainstream media also uses social media to reach many people across their sphere of reach. For this reason, social movements continue to seek legitimation from the mainstream media because the social media pages do not have enough fans to amplify their viewpoints.

Whilst it is clear that social media alone cannot effectively advance the emancipation of social movements, the blended approach is proposed in order to deal with the question of disseminating alternative discourses. In a digitally divided country, the blended approach acts as a bridge. Van Dijk (2012) also indicated that access to the internet alone cannot sufficiently bridge the digital divide. Other levels of the digital divide are prevalent among those who have access to the internet. The blended approach takes into consideration various methods that can be used to disseminate alternative discourses.

Various social movements still believe in other methods of communication, such as community radio, local newspapers, electronic newspapers, and public radio stations broadcasting in African languages (interviewees). Although the footprint of the community radio or local newspaper remains small, social movements' activists have shown their admiration for community-based media in their campaigns. Tyali (2017) also reiterated the importance of community-based broadcasting in the Africanisation of the airwaves. The community-based media are also favoured because they speak to issues of the community in vernacular languages. The emergence of online alternative titles such as *The Daily Maverick*, *Daily Vox*, *New Frame*, and *GroundUp* has proved to be a profound success. These online titles are considered the champions of social justice because they adopt a protest-centric approach in their reporting. However, studies conducted on alternative online newspapers in Zimbabwe

have revealed that online titles are riddled with various challenges such as limited reach, lack of credibility and their accessibility is based on elitism (Moyo 2007; Moyo 2011). However, this finding cannot be generalised to the above-mentioned online newspapers because the contexts are varied.

In other instances, Mthombeni (2020, interviewee) proposed that journalists who come from the community and other alternative media titles should not forget who they are when the big media groups absorb them. These journalists must continue to be sympathetic to social justice issues irrespective of the constraints they face within their organisational context (ibid). On the other hand, social media is also an important disseminator of knowledge despite the challenges it continues to face. The blended approach entails that those who find social media to work for their social movement should continue on that path. The blended approach has been recommended for this study because it takes into consideration various traditional and new media platforms that effectively transmit their stories.

## **9.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has proposed a blended approach that takes into cognisance the role played by various media platforms in disseminating alternative discourses. The chapter also responded to the fifth research sub-question which relates to the viability of social media as an alternative media. Various recommendations that are crucial in making social media a viable platform for the dissemination of alternative discourses are as follows. The first recommendation is that social media should be de-commercialised. The evidence presented in this chapter has shown that commercially driven social media are working to preserve the wealth of their owners or shareholders rather than emancipating the population. The second recommendation is that social media should be de-politicised. The type of social media that is envisaged should be free from political ownership whilst playing its role in sustainable politics or what Zikode (2020) terms 'living politics'. The third recommendation is that social media should be localised or Africanised. Africans must create a social media platform that speaks to their contexts and challenges. The next chapter discusses these recommendations in greater detail.

## **CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS - A PAN-AFRICANIST APPROACH**

### **10.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a summative overview of the study. In recapitulating the findings, the chapter also explains how the research findings respond to the research problem, objectives, and questions. The chapter goes further to offer some concluding arguments that form the basis of this dissertation. The conclusion also discusses how this dissertation fits into the broader discussion on development as embedded in the South African National Development Policy and African Union development initiatives. Furthermore, the chapter proffers various recommendations to all stakeholders such as the State, the civil society, the media, and the scholarly community. The chapter also aims to advance the academic sphere by recommending critical areas for future studies and superimposing the various research gaps that need to be closed. In its concluding remarks relating to the main research problem, the chapter determines whether or not the findings support the extant literature or theory.

### **10.2 Summative overview of the study**

The introduction presented in Chapter One has outlined the background to the study, the research problem and questions, the research aim and objectives, and the rationale for conducting this study. The study has investigated the extent to which social media has the potential to act as alternative media. The need for alternative media has arisen because the mainstream media has ignored the issues of the social movements that represent the marginalised members of society. In the digital era, there is a great potential for social movements to use social media to communicate their alternative discourses and challenge the hegemony. However, social media, which has been heralded as transformatory (Castells 2012), is often limited by a variety of challenges that include the digital divide and commercialisation of media whilst representing the issues of the subalterns. Therefore, the study explored both the opportunities and challenges with regard to establishing whether or not social media can act as alternative media.

The literature review presented in Chapter Two delved into the diverging ideas related to social media as alternative media. The literature review was divided into three

sections. The first section provided a historical analysis of media in South Africa with a specific emphasis on alternative media. The historical analysis helped the researcher to zoom into the past of alternative media in an attempt to be sensible about the present. The second section focused on the concept of alternative media and how it transcended into the digital age. The term alternative media was defined and also juxtaposed with mainstream media. The discussion has also looked into alternative media in the digital age and examined its influence on agenda setting, how it contributes to development and identified some of the critics of alternative media. The third section focused on the intricate concept of social media. The chapter provided a definition of social media, including various debates relating to how social media may foster democracy and instigate revolutions. Various scholars have linked social media to participatory democracy (Castells 2012; Shirky 2008). However, this conceptualisation of social media has been challenged by Mutsvairo (2016), Fuchs (2014a), and Gerbaudo (2012) who argue that social media has not changed the status quo for social movements.

In Chapter Three, the study is framed by the theoretical underpinnings of the Critical Theory, which critiques all forms of dominations and exploitations. The Critical Theory in this study is anchored by the following four theories: (1) The Network Society Theory, which fosters an understanding of the relationship between communication networks and society; (2) The Public Sphere Theory, which is the sphere in which ideas of society are discussed without frontiers; (4) the Critical Political Economy Theory, which was used to understand the interplay between the political and economic ownership of social media; and (3) the Post-colonial Subaltern Theory, which is concerned about expropriation of the marginal voices by the dominant groups.

In Chapter Four, the study outlined the research methodologies applied in the study, the research paradigms, research design, data collection techniques, sampling methods, data analysis techniques, limitations, and ethical issues. The research method was guided by the critical and post-colonial paradigm which forms part of the study's theoretical foundation. These paradigms, which are largely qualitative, also placed the human being at the centre of these technological developments. Since the study involved the use of social media by social movements, greater emphasis was placed on the need to understand how social media can be beneficial to subaltern

beings. The critical and post-colonial paradigms also influenced the type of research design this study followed. The qualitative research design was favoured because it allowed the researcher to thoroughly probe into the issues. The data were collected through in-depth interviews and social media analysis. The activists from social movements were interviewed in order to understand how they used social media to challenge the dominant system of power. The data emanating from interviews were analysed using critical discourse analysis. The study also conducted social media analysis in order to observe how the social movements used social media as alternative media to challenge the hegemony. The limitations that were observed in the study relate to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Precisely, the initial plan to conduct focus group interviews was cancelled.

### **10.3 The extent to which the question or objectives have been answered**

It is important to embark on this reflexive exercise to determine the extent to which the research addressed the research problem, questions and objectives. Since the study is exploratory in nature, it was preoccupied with exploring a specific phenomenon rather than finding solutions to complex problems. A study relating to social media, which is a versatile medium, can reveal multiple realities. Therefore, the research problem necessitating this study dealt with the new media that is permeating all the spheres of human life. In investigating the extent to which social media acts as an alternative media, the research has looked at the communication activities of social movements on social media. It is important to note that the success of social movements in society relies on good alternative media that is able to put their alternative discourses into the public domain.

The following five research questions were put forward in an attempt to answer the main research question: (1) What opportunities do social movements derive from using social media as their alternative discourses? (See Chapters Five and Six for answers). (2) What are the threats of social media in becoming a viable alternative media? (See Chapters 6 and 7 for answers). (3) To what extent does the ownership and control of social media inhibit and accelerate alternative voices? (See Chapter 8 for answers). (4) What is the viable model to sustain alternative media in the era of digitisation and commercialisation? (See Chapter 9 for answers). The extent to which research questions or objectives have been answered was presented along with the

summary of each finding and discussion chapters below (Chapters 5-9).

#### **10.4 Summary of findings**

The findings of this study were presented in five chapters (Chapter 5-9). Chapter Five presented findings relating to how social movements have been using social media as their alternative media. The findings uncovered that social movements have embraced the power of social media, which they use for a variety of reasons, and key amongst them are: the need to challenge the dominant narrative, challenge the mainstream media agenda, become a source of information, and bypass bureaucracy. All of this demonstrates the opportunities that social movements derive from using social media. This chapter responds to Research Question One, which sought to understand what opportunities social movements derive from using social media to communicate their alternative discourses.

Chapter Six delved into the analysis of social media pages in order to understand how social movements use social media to communicate their messages. The reach, the number of followers, the type of message, engagement rates and follower or following relationships had been observed. The analysis uncovered that the student-based movement, which is the *#feesmustfall* movement in this case, was highly engaged in hashtag activism. They used hashtags to communicate their grievances to the authorities. However, the findings indicate that the success of such activism cannot be solely attributed to social media. It has been noted that social media is more intricate and involves a variety of dynamics. For instance, the observation made regarding social media is that hashtags are susceptible to capture by dominant people who are not part of the activism. During the *#feesmustfall* protest, influential accounts like those of Julius Malema, Floyd Shivambu, Gareth Cliff, Trevor Noah, Casper Lee, Eusebius McKaiser and the mainstream media channels became the centre of attention after participating in the hashtag. Apart from being on top of *Twitter* results, they also use their influence to paint a different picture of the protest. The politicians also used hashtags to communicate their political ideologies and fragment the protesters who had converged along non-partisan lines. All of these examples demonstrate the intricacies of using hashtag activism.

On the other side, *Facebook* was also used by social movements such as *Abahlali*

*baseMjondolo*, *Equal Education*, *Landless People's Movement* and the *Unemployed People's Movement*. *Facebook* is one of the most used social media in South Africa. Unlike *Twitter*, where hashtag activism occurs, *Facebook* offers social movements an opportunity to build their networks. In this case, social movements can use *Facebook* to communicate with their defined network of followers. In some instances, conversations go viral when many followers share the statuses, but this is not always guaranteed. Social movements can only be guaranteed to reach a large audience when they boost their statuses (paying a specific amount of money to reach a specific size of audience). This function has put many social movements that do not have money in an undesirable situation. This practice has been regarded as the elitism of social media because social movements without financial resources will find it difficult to gain more fans and engagements. The Post-Colonial Subaltern Theory and the Elite Public Sphere Theory were used to explain the situation where the marginal voices are overwhelmed by the elite's voices. In answering Research Question One, it is clear that social media does not accelerate alternative voices in a way that has been hypothesised.

Chapter Seven has gone further to look at the various challenges being faced by social movements on social media. This chapter has attempted to answer Research Question Two of the research problem, which asked about the threats of social media in becoming a viable alternative media. In answering this question, the social activist identified the digital divide as a major challenge. The digital divide, which manifests in various facets, continues to be one of the stumbling blocks for social movements. The digital divide is posing a challenge to social activism in South Africa because the country is characterised by the highest levels of inequality. These social movements are also representing the marginalised population, such as the unemployed, the landless and poor students. Whilst social media have the biggest footprint of users in South Africa, some of these users do not have uninterrupted access to social media. Consequently, the analysis of the *Facebook* pages of the social movement also demonstrates the low level of engagement rates. The Post-Colonial Subaltern Theory was used to explore the digital divide which is linked to the concept of the digital subaltern. Various African scholars such as Moyo (2016) and Wa Thiong'o (1993) have observed that the digital divide within an African context manifests at various levels, including the language and cultural divides.



Apart from the digital divide, the social movements also identified the challenges of fake news. Social media, which is commonplace for people who hold competing ideas, has seen some people sharing unverified stories. The reliability of social media has also been questioned due to the proliferation of fake news, resulting in many people being predisposed to believe stories that come from mainstream media. Such stories include those coming from unfamiliar sources or unverified accounts; thus, stories from marginal social movements may be dismissed as fake. The other challenge that emerged is that social media seemingly prioritises entertainment at the expense of critical discussions. An analysis of *Facebook* has revealed that text-based statuses received less engagement than picture-based statuses. This is caused by the advertising model of social media giants which promotes entertainment-driven content thus stifling critical discussion. Other social movements were also bothered by spies, hackers and unsolicited advertising that permeated their social media pages.

Chapter Eight presented the findings relating to the ownership and control of social media. The chapter responded to Research Question Three which sought to establish whether the ownership and control of social media is a key enabler or disabler of alternative discourses. The Critical Political Economy Theory was used to understand the mutual relationship between the ownership of social media and the political authorities. Since social media are privately owned, it is important to look at how their ownership can change the status quo for social movements. The findings reveal that social media are becoming big and monopolised. The concentration of social media ownership in the hands of the elites has serious ramifications for democracy as only a few social media companies can decide what circulates in the public domain. Karl Marx's idea of capital accumulation seems to resonate well with this phenomenon. Media monopolies tend to prioritise the ideas of private citizens and those who control the means of production.

The social media oligopolies also have a mutual relationship with governments. Since the inception of the internet during the Cold War, there has been a symbiotic relationship between social media and government. Governments need favourable social media to communicate their messages to their citizens. Zuboff (2019) alluded to the fact that favourable social media will ensure that a particular government controls its population through surveillance and behavioural change projects. On the

other front, social media also need favourable government policies and regulations to expand their business empires. This phenomenon where the political and economic power relationships play a critical role in deciding what the public should hear, think and see is best explained by the Critical Political Economy. The findings further demonstrate that social movements that are advocating the issues of the oppressed are mostly marginalised by these interactions between the State and privately owned social media.

Chapter Nine introduced the blended approach that seeks to assist social movements to challenge the hegemony. The chapter responded to Research Question Four which attempted to establish viable models that can sustain alternative media in the digital age. Whilst the online methods of communication have proven to be great in allowing social movements to communicate their discourses, the online world has its shortcomings. The issue of the digital divide, fake news, rapid commercialisation, censorship, and surveillance are some of the challenges that continue to undermine the online world. This chapter mainly argued that social movements should use both online and offline methods of communication. The blended approach is supported by activists of social movements (interviewees) who demonstrated that the success of their movement can be attributed to a variety of communication mediums. Such mediums included community media, such as radio and newspapers, posters, pamphlets, door-to-door interfaces, mass meetings, the public broadcaster, online news sites, blogs, mainstream media and social media. Based on this multi-layered approach to communication, it would be disingenuous to point out social media as the genesis of their success. Chapter 9 has also emphasised the most sustainable model that will transform social media to represent the issues of the marginalised. This sustainable model champions the decommercialisation, depoliticisation and localisation or Africanisation of social media. The recommendations proffered in Section 10.6 of this chapter border on these interventions.

### **10.5 To what extent can social media act as alternative media?**

Based on the findings presented in the previous chapters, the researcher was able to answer the key research questions. The research problem, in this case, necessitated the need to investigate the extent to which social media can act as an alternative media. The research findings make it a challenging task to link privately owned social

media to alternative media. The criterion developed by Fuchs (2010) is very useful in evaluating the extent to which social media is an alternative media. According to Fuchs (2010: 178), alternative media are characterised by: (1) citizen journalism; (2) critical form or content; (3) grassroots media groups and (4) alternative distribution.

The first criterion, which entails *citizen journalism*, is something that social media embraces in its manifestation. Moyo (2014) has characterised citizen journalism as an alternative or subaltern space where ordinary people can express themselves. Citizen journalism has been accelerated by the social media age. Although the era of social media has given ordinary members of society a platform to practice citizen journalism, there has been little progress due to the digital divide. The second aspect, which is *critical content*, is also embraced on social media though to a limited extent. The privately owned social media allows the activist to post critical or alternative content. However, social media behemoths have recently used algorithms to advance certain ideas at the expense of others, thus doing an injustice to alternative or critical content. The third criterion, which encompasses *grassroots media groups*, is not supported by privately owned social media. Social media are owned by conglomerates that are interested in making profits and pushing the neoliberal agenda. As these social media are funded by advertisement, it is incumbent on them to promote popular ideas or content with entertainment value. The privileged can pay in order to have more followers and engagements on social media. Finally, the last criterion, which entails *alternative distribution*, is definitely not supported by privately owned social media. Based on the above analysis, it is clear that social media, which has its roots in the capitalist mode of production, is limited in terms of representing alternative formations. Various scholars have already proposed open-source alternative platforms that are suitable for achieving the alternative goals (Gehl 2015; Fuchs 2018). The next section puts forward some recommendations that help sustain the concept of alternative media in the digital age.

## **10.6 Recommendations**

This dissertation has demonstrated the necessity of preserving alternative media in the digital era. The alternative media represents a range of voices that are essential in contributing to pluralism and a diversity of ideas. Chapter 9 of this study has already

paved the way for a radical rethink of alternative media in the digital age. Such interventions have been tackled in more detail in this section. Throughout history, capitalism has manifested itself in various ways (Marx and Engels 1945; Gramsci 1929; Schiller 1999; Mosco 2008; Curran 2012; Couldry 2010; Fuchs 2014a & b; Zuboff 2019). In whichever format it prevails, capitalism exacerbates exploitation, enslavement, exclusion, discrimination and inequalities. In the digital age, the capitalist system sustains itself through subtle measures that continue to fuel exploitation, discrimination, and exclusions. The evidence portrays social media as capitalistic platforms that are designed to extract data from unsuspecting users. Apart from selling the data of users to advertisers, the social media giants have the potential to use the data to coerce, predict and control people (Zuboff 2019). This scenario represents another source of power at the hands of social media companies. Curran and Seaton (2009) have already observed a situation in which the powerful media wield so much power without responsibility. It is, therefore, clear that the capitalist ownership of social media cannot be entrusted with the responsibility of uplifting the voices of the subalterns.

Critical theorists, such as Marxism, have long theorised about the power of social media in capitalist society. Marxism asserts that those in control of material production simultaneously control mental production. Within the contemporary period, social media giants are responsible for controlling the discourses in the public domain through algorithms and machine learning. Social media are also entrusted with the responsibility of making policies or business decisions that can affect the general populace. A concerted effort is required to de-commercialise and depoliticise social media.

### **10.6.1 A Pan Africanist Approach**

In light of the above discussion, this dissertation proposes developing and adopting a Pan-Africanist Approach to tackle the challenges emanating from privately owned social media. To counter the balance of forces of power, a paradigm shift is needed in Africa. Africans should stop playing a spectator role and play a proactive role in the technological arena. Africa also has an abundance of talent and resources that can be harnessed. If Africa does not recognise this talent, other nations outside of Africa will use such talent to cement their position of power. African governments should support

innovations and start-ups that are promising to create solutions to 21<sup>st</sup> Century problems.

Africa is poised to double its population by 2050. Because of the high population forecast, multinational companies are already setting up themselves to exploit the population in terms of labour and surveillance capitalism. Historically, the scramble for African resources has caused some serious backlash for the continent. For instance, the challenges of child labour as a result of cobalt mining in the DRC are fuelled by the scramble to exploit Africa's labour and resources. Cobalt is used to power new technologies such as smartphones and self-driving cars. According to Kelly (2019), *Apple*, *Google*, *Dell*, Microsoft and *Tesla* have been named in a lawsuit brought by the family members of children who died or were injured while mining in the DRC.

Africa should not depend on the West or East for technological innovation since these innovations are not designed with African problems in mind. Various scholars have already warned about the pitfalls of borrowing and implanting theories, methodologies and 'international best practices' that may not necessarily be applicable in the African context (Berger 2011; Mutsvairo and Moyo 2018). Theories and epistemologies copied from elsewhere are not likely to address African problems. Any solutions adopted from the West or East should be used with caution.

The African Union should prepare itself to disentangle Africa from various forms of exploitation that are technologically driven. Policy and regulatory frameworks that address social media issues should also be intensified. Although Africa does not represent a homogenous place, the African Union should assume a proactive responsibility in determining the type of social media the continent needs to address the challenges it faces. The African Union should position Africa as the next superpower in terms of technological innovation. Individual countries should also ensure that they align their regulatory frameworks to address the various challenges arising from social media. Such challenges include the invasive nature of social media, the concentration of social media ownership and the power of social media in deciding on issues of public interest. Whilst some of the countries in Africa have good policies and targets to tackle the challenges posed by ICTs, such policies are only good theoretically. A concerted effort is needed to implement such policies politically. In

Europe, for instance, various legislative interventions have already been proposed to protect citizens of the European Union against the harmful impact of social media. The African Union should also consider proposing measures that are aimed at protecting the public against the exploitative nature of social media.

### **10.6.2 The Blended Approach**

Social movements should use social media with an understanding of what social media represents. Social movements need to continue adopting the blended approach to communication. Evidence from various social movements indicates that the success of social movements is attributable to the use of various communication methods. The importance of independent platforms such as blogs or websites where they can share their memories, should also be emphasised. As suggested by Mthombeni (2020, interviewee), it is also recommended that social movements should be the training ground for future journalists. This will ensure that journalists carry people-centric ideologies despite being absorbed by mainstream media organisations.

### **10.7 Future studies**

This study, which was situated within the area of Media and Cultural Studies, offers an original contribution to the knowledge of alternative media in the digital era. The study has fostered an understanding of the new phenomenon where social movements use social media as an alternative media. The study proposes that the area of new media requires more research that seeks to understand how the new media function in a given society. The area of new media is characterised by fast-paced developments that require a responsive scientific inquiry. Within the media and communication fraternity, there is a renewed interest in understanding the media content, audience and ownership in the digital age.

Due to capacity constraints, the study only focused on selected social movements within South Africa; therefore, future research ought to explore this phenomenon within a broader African context. Therefore, there is a need to undertake a comparative study that seeks to determine the extent of alternative media in the digital era in various countries within the African continent. Africa, a continent being confronted by various challenges, requires a lot of research that is rooted in the decolonial paradigm to emancipate it. The call to decolonise the theory and methodology dealing with the area

of new media is long overdue. The new media scholars from the Global South should embrace this call. Chiumbu (2017), Moyo and Mutsvairo (2018), and Tyali (2017) have already started foundational studies on the decolonisation of media and communication within South Africa. Decolonial research is necessary to embrace the issues of the subaltern. Therefore, academics should look beyond popular trends in an attempt to emancipate the marginalised.

As part of the decolonisation of the methodology, the initial plan was to involve many subaltern voices in this study. However, the COVID-19 disaster made it difficult to constitute focus-group interviews, which would have given the ordinary members of the social movements the opportunity to share their own experiences. Such members of social movements endure various challenges that include unemployment, landlessness and poverty. In the spirit of decoloniality, it is very crucial to involve the subalterns as primary partners in research. This is a departure from the previous paradigms where the subalterns were only involved as research subjects. Future studies should also focus on the ordinary members of the social movements whose experience has been ignored by previous research. As indicated in the literature chapter, social movements are a bottom-up organisation that draws a lot of inspiration from their members.

Another key recommendation is that policies that deal with social media should be evaluated through the lens of the Critical Political Economy Theory in order to understand their implications for the general populace. As Nkuna (2014) indicated, the making of digital policies is dominated by powerful political and economic actors with a vested interest in the digital migration project. The policymaking process is also an important area that needs solemn consideration as bad policies have often led to poor outcomes. Quite often, the political and economic power relations that are involved in the policymaking process only support self-serving policy decisions. Another area of research that is worth pursuing involves the evaluation of new media policies that are proposed by the South African Government, ICASA, MDDA (Media Development and Diversity Agency), Film and Publication Board and other stakeholders within the media and communication fraternity. It is crucial for researchers to study these policies and determine how they accelerate universal access and deal with the conundrum of the digital divide.

In addition, academics should also participate in the policymaking process through action research. Curran and Seaton (2009) believe that the right policies are important in laying a strong foundation for the performance of the media. It is highly recommended that academics and researchers alike should take an active role in the policymaking process by making submissions that are human-centric (neutral). The study also recommends the undertaking of multi-disciplinary research projects where researchers from various fields of study such as ICT, social sciences, politics, psychology, law and economics can study this phenomenon together for the betterment of humanity. Such collaborative research can lead to a new social media environment that takes into consideration the cultural aspirations of the African audiences. Also, it is recommended that social media should not be commercially driven to enable it to represent a diverse range of ideas and pluralism.

### **10.7 Integrative conclusion**

The dissertation concludes by demonstrating some quagmires encountered in defining the concept of alternative media in the social media age. As indicated in Chapter Two, the concept of alternative media has been intriguing to various scholars (Atton 2002a; Fuchs 2010; Jeppeson 2015; O'Sullivan 2010; Sandoval and Fuchs 2010). This concept has broad connotations which can be understood differently by different scholars. According to Bailey et al. (2008), the term 'alternative media' refers to the type of media that is used to counter the hegemony and to challenge the power of mainstream media. Based on this formulation, it will be difficult to consider social media owned by the global behemoth as an alternative media establishment.

Whilst the space of social media allows a variety of voices to co-exist, this does not theoretically fulfil all the requirements of alternative media. Mano and Mukhongo (2016) indicated that the use of social media as alternative media is limiting because it is embedded in the capitalist mode of production. For a long time, social media has been erroneously linked to alternative media that can challenge the hegemony. This dissertation has demystified these inconclusive arguments by presenting counter-evidence demonstrating that social media is ideologically limited in representing alternative formations.

Gehl (2015) indicated that alternative media does not only entail alternative content but wholesale ownership of the decentralised forms of media. Therefore, a centralised



form of media like *Facebook* and *Twitter* that are owned by huge conglomerates cannot be alternative media in theoretical terms. Social media are, in their nature, a new mainstream platform that is part of the hegemony because they are owned by private owners who have a vested interest in the commercially driven media. The media that are privately owned and monopolised will not wholeheartedly fulfil their alternative media role. The evidence presented in this dissertation indicates that private social media have usurped the power to set the agenda and gate-keeping. Through algorithms, social media can promote certain ideas to appear more prominent and also influence people to make particular political decisions. This demonstrates that social media are part of the mainstream media since they promote the dominant culture. Moyo (2014) posits that alternative and subaltern spaces must not be part of mainstream media and must be ideologically counterpoised to elite media that advance the interest of the State or capital. Alternative media cannot thrive within corporate social media which are part of the mainstream establishment. Social media appear to epitomise capitalism which is ideologically hostile to alternative ideas in its manifestation.

Bailey et al. (2008) also articulated that the situation whereby the activists are absorbed by mainstream media is called double-hegemony. Whilst the social activists represent the counter-hegemony, the structures that they use to voice their discontent are hegemonic. The hegemonic structures have the power at their disposal to limit and suppress the counter-hegemonic views. In this case, Gehl (2015) indicated that the alternative media formations have an ambivalent relationship with social media. As much as the space of social media allows a variety of voices to co-exist, social media on the other side are owned by global conglomerates that are often hostile to alternative or counter-hegemonic ideas (Gehl 2015). In addition, both social media and mainstream media are mutually inclusive because they are driven by a similar principle, which is an accumulation of wealth (Schiller 1999, Mosco 2008, Curran 2012, Fuchs 2014a).

The conventional definition of alternative media excludes social media on the basis that they are owned by the capitalists who advance the interest of capital and, in some instances, the interest of the State. Fuchs (2010) believes that alternative media should be independent or community-owned, non-commercial, and should be

sustained through donations, volunteerism and other resources mobilised by the public. Theoretically, social media, as alternative media, is limited because social activists are still bound to behave according to the standards set and dictated by the capitalist ownership of social media. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, capitalist media owners have the power to suppress or limit certain views. This situation is not different from the traditional mainstream media that normally give coverage to social movements, simultaneously reserving the power to decide when and how to cover such stories. Various social movement activists (interviewees) indicated that their strategy is to penetrate the mainstream media to publicise their campaigns. The mere fact that social media and mainstream media are covering the stories of social movements does not guarantee that they are alternative media platforms. It is important to note that both social media and mainstream media are not designed to promote the politics of the subaltern.

Based on the discussion above, it would be disingenuous to call social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter* alternative media because they are part of the mainstream platforms that are prioritising mainstream agendas driven by profit. The scope of alternative media should not extend to privately-owned social media which are part of the mainstream agenda. According to Moyo (2018), the internet represents a virtual form of coloniality. Since social media are borderless, the potential to spread Western ideologies, which are driven by globalisation, capitalism and neoliberalism, is accelerated. Horkheimer and Adorno (1982) also emphasised that the culture industry emanates from the more liberal industrial nations such as the US. The permeation of Western ideologies may challenge the local traditions, languages and cultures. As a multicultural country, South Africa requires social media that does not represent a monoculture. Therefore, social media should preserve a range of cultures and traditions in its manifestation. The most likely thing about corporate social media is the fact that they are inherently non-African, and they may harbour anti-African sentiments. The African values and beliefs system that are underpinned by the concept of Ubuntu (working together), are being threatened by social media (Zikode 2020, interviewee). The emerging evidence shows that social media are built on weak ties that promote the politics of individualism instead of togetherness (Curran 2012). Social media that is rooted in individualism is rendered weak and incapable of challenging the dominant ideology.

Although social media and the mainstream media are driven by a similar principle, which is about the accumulation of wealth, social media has taken this principle to an unprecedented level. The dominance of social media is unparalleled due to the fact that it has blurred the lines between facts, opinions, editorials and adverts. The lines between alternative and mainstream media have also been blurred. Social media ought to aggregate content from various sources and present it as it is, but that is not the case. Commercially driven social media entities have an agenda of accelerating capitalism and cannot be divorced from Western ideologies. Those who have money can use social media to affirm their position of power. Conversely, those without money are rendered invisible.

Therefore, it is clear that corporate social media has not changed the status quo of social movements. The social movements are rendered invisible on privately owned social media and it will be difficult for them to challenge the hegemony within the social media system that sustains the capitalist ideology. The current oligopolistic situation guarantees the dominance of social media companies over the affairs of the world. The above discussion demonstrates that social media is not ideologically suited to accelerate alternative agendas. Precisely, social media cannot be vested with the utmost responsibility of positively changing the situation of the subalterns.

This dissertation concludes by saying that whilst many people have considered social media as an alternative media, social media is a versatile medium which has its limitations. The type of alternative media the researcher envisages in the era of new media should be owned by communities that do not have a vested interest in profits. Therefore, it is only independent media platforms that can put the agenda of the subalterns into the public sphere.

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