Exploring new media technologies among young South African Women

Desiree Lewis, Tigist Shewarega Hussen[1] and Monique van Vuuren

Introduction

Contemporary South Africa reveals far less evidence of the sustained and widespread debate, networking and activism that raised public awareness about feminisms in previous decades. During the 1980s, organisations aligned with the United Democratic Front offered spaces for working women, students and activists to craft feminist discourses and activism in relation to anti-apartheid politics. By 1992, the Women's National Coalition, drawing together numerous women from different regional coalitions, community organisations and political parties collaboratively pursued the integration of gender transformation into the new political dispensation being negotiated at the time. Kemp *et al* remark on the way the Women's National Coalition allowed diverse groups of South African women to "identify common concerns...[and to] command an authority that none of them could achieve alone" (1995: 151). Feminist activism and discourses during the 1990s also incorporated animated controversy about race, class and knowledge production. Teresa Barnes' (2002) analysis of feminist conferences and workshops throughout the 1990s reveals how students, activists and academics engaged in difficult debates about power relations among South African women and feminists.

The visibility and impact of discourses about gender transformation in the present day are significantly different. At one level, gender activism has become increasingly issue-driven, with women farm workers, domestic workers or sex workers, for example, tackling policies or circumstances that directly affect their members.[2] At the same time, "gender activism" has increasingly taken the form of assimilationist politics, where a minority of women achieves positions of power and rarely acts to ensure the empowerment of the majority. As Shireen Hassim argues, "The idea of gender equality is thus increasingly

reduced to a vague set of 'good intentions', which are rarely translated into meaningful policy and ideological demands" (2006: 368). Sectoral forms of gender activism and inclusionary politics fail to "impact laterally on the political agendas of other social movements and in civil society more generally" (Ibid.). This situation does little to galvanise public debate about deeply entrenched power and injustice – especially among young women, who are unable to find inspiration in past experiences or memories of intellectual and political activism.

This article reflects on how the use of digitised communication and social media among young black South African women can be situated and assessed within the current context. The authors focus especially on nuanced explorations of "civic participation," "empowerment" and "identity politics" in acknowledging the liberatory potential of young women's use of information and communication technology (ICTs) and seeking to assess its effects in realistic ways. We therefore speculate about how the uses of ICTs can both open up new possibilities for activism and agency and reveal the difficult formation of what Nancy Fraser has called "subaltern counterpublics" (1992: 109–142) among socially marginalised young women.

Our analysis is guided by our different locations and research interests as women who live and work in Cape Town. Desiree Lewis teaches Women's and Gender Studies at a historically black university, the University of the Western Cape, and has recently become involved in action research on feminist knowledge production and new media. As an older woman whose encounters with feminist and anti-racist politics date back to struggles as a student during the 1980s, she is especially intrigued by how young South African women find a voice in the face of new challenges for social justice and the overwhelming range of information and visual images that they confront. Tigist Shewarega Hussen is a PhD student completing her research on embodied subjectivities in the post-apartheid South African imaginary. Having begun her university studies in Management Information System (MIS), a profession integrating computer science technologies with people-oriented fieldwork, she shifted to gender studies as a postgraduate. She therefore has an ongoing interest in the gendered impacts of digital technologies alongside her current political and academic interests in gender relations. Monique van Vuuren, who defines herself as always having been a "feminist at heart," is determined to explore issues of justice and equality in interdisciplinary and

creative ways. Her MA research focuses on the cultural implications of young women's self-expression and knowledge production through communicative forms including social media.

Since February 2013, the three authors have been involved in a digital activist project whose participants include women students at a historically marginalised university, the University of the Western Cape, and young women from socially marginalised communities surrounding the university.[3] Part of a broader three-country project[4] which seeks to enhance socially marginalised women's public participation, the South African component of the project has focused specifically on young women. Our analysis is based on work within this project as well as general observations about the engagement of young South African women.

Young women's "cognitive surplus"

A dominant understanding of the role of ICTs for women's empowerment in the global South has been its potential to facilitate job-creation and "national" economic growth. Echoing an entrenched developmentalist model, this view advocates increasing and facilitating socially marginalised women's access to technology. The growing ICT for development research, technology, business, education and skills training and funding industries – driven both nationally by business and government and internationally – has reinforced this: Northern donor funding and research, government policy and business corporations unrelentingly repeat the message that marginalised women in South Africa will inevitably be empowered through increasing their access to ICTs. It is revealing that some of the case studies in the book, *African women and ICTs* edited by Ineke Buskens and Anne Webb (2009) draw on this developmentalist model. Driven by the United Nations since the 1970s in order to integrate women in the global South into existing global economic systems, this model has become deeply entrenched in work about third-world women and ICTs.[5]

A preoccupation among many young South African women with skills acquisition and the translation of these into "empowerment" is not solely the result of dominant developmentalist agendas promoted by governments, many NGOs or business corporations. Enormous economic challenges confront young black South African women in the present day. The growth of multinational companies and increasing labour specialisation in the post-

apartheid period has transformed earlier employment patterns and eroded the employment routes taken by previous generations of women. Currently, unemployment in South Africa has increased, and has had a particularly destructive impact on *young* women and men.[6]

At one level, many young South African women's deep preoccupation with skills acquisition is symptomatic of national and global structural problems: the post-apartheid government's rapid embrace of neoliberal policies and neoliberalism globally has tended to generate an instinct for individual survival and personal growth within the existing socio-economic system. Yet we would also argue that many young women's attraction to ICTs speaks volumes about their perceptions of their potential to create, rather than simply consume, the media content that gratifies them. In their study of women students at the University of Zimbabwe, Mbambo-Thata *et al* (2009) show that female students' limited engagement relative to their male counterparts was not a result of timidity or technophobia. Women students, they argue, "did not lack confidence in their capacities" (2009: 70), but were constrained by using them in male-dominated institutional spaces and cultures and benefited enormously from female-friendly approaches.

This confidence in a women-centred environment was clearly manifested in our work with Project participants. In focus groups and workshops among young women, we have been made aware of the zeal with which young women have responded to new technologies ranging from iPads to video cameras. Significantly, this enthusiasm and confidence have been pronounced among both student participants and the young women with no tertiary-level education.

What can such young women's confidence about their right and ability to use media tools tell us? Clay Shirky's (2010)[7] discussion of the "cognitive surplus" available to groups in making choices about what media they engage with and derive gratification from is suggestive here. Shirky's cyber-optimism is clearly Western-centric, and his effusive praise for the new "connected age" ignores and fudges many complexities, contradictions and power relations. At the same time, his notion of "cognitive surplus" provides a valuable concept in making sense of how individuals – from different groups – use the free time available to them, even when this "free" time might be in-between intensive labour or compromised by emotionally and materially draining pressures. As Shirky suggests, ICTs are embraced by particular users because, among

an increasingly wide range of choices, they satisfy the users' intellectual, creative, existential and political needs. While Shirky does not dwell on this, the potential of ICTs to address a confluence of imaginative, self-defining and social needs is what we wish to concentrate on here. In what follows, we explore the multilayered ways in which certain socially marginalised young women in South Africa are struggling to develop new languages of personal and social freedoms in the context of the political gap resulting from the current weakness of a national women's movement specifically, and, more generally, the fragility of intellectual and political activism that frames particular social struggles and challenges.

In their account of mobile phone culture in Africa, the editors of *Mobile phones: The new talking drums of Africa* (De Bruijn *et al* 2009) write that it is often women who have embraced the more expensive and slick aspects of mobile phones, adventurously harnessing them as a "vehicles for identity and identification" (2009: 14). This seems to confirm stereotypes about women as the naïve dupes of consumerism; the suggestion is that men, motivated by pragmatism, tend to turn rationally to ICTs for their functional use, while women, who are assumed to be intensively socialised into "looking good for others," are more likely to embrace their possibilities for status and image.

However, another way of explaining the popularity and enthusiastic uptake of the more expensive and innovative technologies among women is to take into account their distinctive needs for independent and "authentic" communication, the extent to which mainstream communicative platforms, including television, magazines and newspapers, and, indeed, many new media platforms as well, ignore their vantage points. From this perspective, marginalised groups' embracing of the most innovative mobile phones or applications can be seen as their quest for communicative channels that transcend those that simply reinforce their silence, objectification or absence. This explanation partially accounts for the high consumption of expensive and state-of the-art mobile phones in Africa, and the comparatively frugal and modest use and purchase of mobile phones in many countries in the North. In what follows, it will be suggested that young women are often motivated by a politicised need for "authentic" communication, and while aspirations to modernity, glamour and social acceptance may certainly come into play, these are not the only reasons for their passionate interests in new media.

Youth, young women and civic engagement

Hermann Wasserman affirms the importance of studies of popular culture in Africa that avoid a "naïve celebration of resistance" (2010: 10) and instead convey a "nuanced assessment" of how it can become a "platform for the articulation of controversial or popular political views" (Wasserman, 2010: 10). In this section, we seek to explore ways in which South Africans marginalised on the basis of age as well as gender have used new media platforms to carve out spaces of freedom and moments of independent communication. These spaces and moments rarely provide direct political commentary or resistance; rather, they offer cognitive spaces in which certain youth, and young women in particular, articulate their consciousness of their social, cultural and political world.

Livingstone *et al* argue that "young people are often positioned by even the most well-meaning public sector sites not as citizens but as citizens-in-waiting" (2007: 5). Many bewail the prevalence of a widespread sense of apathy to politics in present-day South Africa, and point to the lack of involvement of young South African men and women citizens in the political sphere/space/affairs. This holds true in political matters at various government – national, provincial, or municipal – levels over issues ranging from service delivery to violence against children and women.

South African politicians are inclined to espouse the doctrine that "young people should always respect their elders." This doctrine was directly articulated and valorised by President Jacob Zuma on numerous occasions when responding to dissent or vilifications by the former ANC Youth League (ANCYL) president Julius Malema and his supporters.[8] While Malema does of course not represent "the youth," and has of course utilised patriarchal and exclusivist politics for his own political ends, the castigation of the youth by an elder is a deeply entrenched trope for prescribing the silence and compliance of young people in governance, and young women especially. The message clearly implies that South African politics, similar to the politics of other postcolonial states in Africa, is the domain of the veterans, the "old," those who fought for liberation and ensured that a younger generation has freedom.

The Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa (EISA)[9] together with the SADC Youth Movement recently reported that this kind of political culture and discourse creates an increasing level of apathy and

disinterest in politics among young people. As a result, many young people abdicate interest in politics by citing youth or inexperience. As Livingston *et al* noted, "they feel justified in recognising little responsibility to participate" (2007: 5) and this is recently evident in trends in the political landscape of South Africa, whereby there is a steady decline in the number of politically active eligible young people who join unions, political parties or even vote in elections.

Young people's avoidance of existing political institutions as well as the new and traditional information associated with these is partly a result of their perceived lack of autonomy. A recent example of young people's political response – outside of the predictable frameworks of political discourse – involved their reactions to a bank's advertising campaign. In January 2013 the South African First National Bank (FNB) created a campaign called "You Can Help," using a series of online videos in which a number of South African youths, mainly from socially marginalised communities, addressed the nation about critical political and social issues in the country. The campaign generated considerable controversy. Although the purpose of the advertisement, according to the bank, is to galvanise the nation into helping, the African National Congress (ANC), particularly the ANCYL, called the campaign "treacherous." They insist that the scripts read by the young people featured in the video were edited in order to convey the political stand that FNB seemed to have against the ANC. Evidently, ANC spokesperson Jackson Mthembu said the party was appalled by the campaign "in which the ANC, its leadership and government, is under attack on a commercial masqueraded as youth views" (News24, 2013). The ad was eventually withdrawn following outraged criticism from the ruling party, the ANC.

Although the mainstream media gave some coverage to this event and popular responses, the most animated responses came from young people using mobile phones, Twitter, Facebook and other social media. Many felt that the bank, despite its own entanglement in capitalist accumulation, had created a politically important opportunity for young people to speak out about corruption, their sense of betrayal by their leaders and the problems with the present South African government.

Online responses, debates and comments on different media Twitter, Mxit, Facebook and YouTube proved the youth's strong sense of civic identity. For instance, a young woman on YouTube link commented that "And this advert

wasbanned ??????."[10] Disappointed by the banning of the advertisement another individual commented "I see a lot of ass kissing by corporates as they do everything the ruling party thinks is politically correct to say or do, they found the shoe to be fitting and they wore it."[11] Because many of the campaigns featured young black people from impoverished communities (some of whom were filmed at their schools), their testimonies (within the public sphere) encouraged others in similar situations to comment using mobile phones, the internet and any other communicative resources available to them. The energetic communication among less-privileged young people about issues of governance and the corruptness of certain politicians was an unusual moment in South African political debate. And many were disappointed by the bank's eventual decision to back down following the ruling party's criticism. Although the campaign videos continue to exist on YouTube,[12] the political dialogues that would have surfaced had this campaign continued in the public sphere dissipated, and so compromised one platform for youth's civic engagement through interactive networking.

What this example also reveals is the way potential sites or subjects for young people's civic participation can be abruptly curtailed when there is a belief – whether by ruling parties, by older people or the media – that more important issues should take precedence. Here it is clear that "young people are often positioned by even the most well-meaning public sector sites not as citizens but as citizens-in-waiting" (Livingstone *et al* 2007: 5). The idea that these youths could or should have their own opinions was not acknowledged, since youths are instrumentalised in others agendas. Clearly conveying this, ANC spokesperson Keith Khoza said "young people don't necessarily understand the challenges of governance and undoing 250 years of oppression and colonialism" (see Bauer, 2013).

Authoritarian politics involving the castigation of the youth by elders is a deeply entrenched pattern for enforcing the silence and compliance of young people in governance. The message clearly implies that South African politics, similar to the authoritarian politics of other postcolonial states in Africa, is the domain of the veterans, the "old," those who fought for liberation and ensured that a younger generation has freedom. A political culture that infantalises youths by defining them as those who should remain listeners and not critical commentators can easily create a high level of apathy and disinterest among youth by proscribing their "public participation."

We agree with Vromen (2007) and Livingstone *et al*'s (2007) arguments that often websites are used to reinforce or confirm a political status quo. As such, they frequently "focus on government-directed information delivery and consultation with individuals rather than active processes of citizen ownership and collective forms of participation" (Vromen 2007: 61). Confirmations of the status quo can also take the form of impersonal information or scholarship, which, for example, explores marginalised young women's economic, bodily or political exploitation in highly technical and abstract ways.

At another level, internet and mobile activity, unlike traditional media forms such as newspapers, can be driven by youth and other marginalised groups themselves. The cyber-optimist belief that ICTs can provide a political space for young people to "have a right to express themselves, for their voices to become visible to 'be heard' [through]" (Livingstone *et al*, 2007: 4) is therefore important in exploring emerging forms of information-sharing on public interest matters that are driven by those who are marginalised on the basis of age.

The example of the South African youth's engagement with FNB advertisements conveys the need for flexible and context-specific undertandings of civic engagement and politics. In the South African context, the general understanding of civic engagement echoes dominant views about "the political" in previous decades. The limitations of this view of "the political" as spectacular have been criticised by commentators including Njabulo Ndebele (1986). As Ndebele observed, it is often through "rediscovering" the ordinary and the everyday that some of the most penetrating insights into the "political" emerge. In the context of the information revolution, where young women in Cape Town use technologies including Facebook, websites and mobile phones, the content and platforms of much ICT activity frequently form their present expressions about "the ordinary and everyday." Thus, information sharing and networking about civic issues are often developing in forums that appear to be extremely small-scale, frivolous or general – as well as the large-scale platforms for civic engagement, such as Women'sNet.[13] Moreover, many forums established for others' or seemingly general purposes are adapted by young women seeking to articulate their distinctive concerns.

An interesting example of such nascent community formation and civic engagement is the recent "confessions" movement among South African students on Facebook. To our knowledge, this movement runs in three

universities – namely UCT Confessions (based at the University of Cape Town) that at the time of writing has 26 367 followers, UWC Confessions (based at the University of Western Cape) with 283 followers, and Rhodes Confessions (based at Rhodes University) that has 12 755 followers. Unlike individuals' personal Facebook pages, these pages guarantee complete anonymity, allowing individuals to share stories in ways that personal Facebook pages cannot. For young women, especially, this forum has provided a crucial space for testimonies of abuse. Despite the fact that many posters seem to identify as male, women-identified posts often focus on their unique experiences of violence. For instance, on 30 May, UWC Confession 56 wrote:

> *depro alert *Halfway through my degree I found out I was molested as a kid and realised I was raped twice in my teens, one of those times by UWC student. I end up going to a clinic for four weeks. No-one noticed I left campus till three months later, no-one even noticed I was crying on steps outside B-block in full view of everyone. I still can't even grasp the seriousness of my shit coz it's that fucked up, this shit happens much more than people realize, all the stats and shit that gets thrown in our faces on a daily basis desensitize us from realizing how serious this is. I am not comfortable telling people this happened to me with a face, so I hope in some way this post helps open some eyes without me having to give my identity.

What is especially noteworthy about this testimony is the anger in the speaker's reference to existing public platforms ("the stats and shit that get thrown in our faces"). It seems to be her "facelessness" that gives her the power to speak out, to create a sense of solidarity which establishes the link between her own experience and interpretation of violation and the political realities of young women's routine subjection to violence, often in schools or universities. In many ways, then, the widespread use of social media among many young women – whether platforms are set up for them or serve broader purposes – creates opportunities for their expression about "personal" and daily communication that more traditional forms of mobilising and action tend to neglect. And opportunities for such frank communication about the everyday can offer crucial routes into consciousness-raising and transformative politics among young South African women.

While personal and everday experiences and observations frequently form the basis of many young women's civic engagement, their reflections on

groups in wider national and global contexts can also convey commentary on global politics. In our work with young women we have observed that they have been drawn to online pages that raise the complexities of social identification within global contexts. In many cases, visual images become important entry points into discussion about dominant power relations and how they can be unsettled. Here it is worth mentioning Afro Queens,[14] African Heritage City,[15] Black History Album,[16] Unpacking the "F" word,[17] Wild Women Sisterhood[18] and Faithless Daughters[19] as examples. Almost on a daily basis (sometimes continuously throughout the day), these Facebook pages produce different posts that testify to issues of identity from a global perspective. And debates and responses continue on the issue raised by making connections to similar local and international matters.

For instance, on 25 March 2013 on Unpacking the "F" word, a picture of black woman wearing a t-shirt that proclaimed "Please respect me like I am a white person" was posted with an invitation for open discussion around racism and sexism; 290 likes, 50 shares, and 304 comments were made. Although the racial discourse revealed in this picture and conversation is set in the US, due to the characteristics of "online" community, conversations were able to happen globally, with different people from different countries revealing such social issues. Obviously many young women were not happy about the shirt. Some commented that it constituted a denial of black identity. There were comments like "what a stupid fucking shirt," "This is disheartening why as white women? Why not equal?" There were also racist clashes – a young white women responding "I'm going to wear a shirt that says beat me like a black lady," which provoked a black woman to furiously insult her back "you're an asshole."[20]

Some, however, applauded the courage it took for this young women to wear the shirt in public. There were insightful comments: "this thread reads like a lesson on white privilege," "this thread is a good illustration of why someone felt the need to make this shirt," "I love that she feels comfortable expressing her feelings about a very tense topic. Love the freedom of this photo," "She is not implying that there is something wrong with being Black. I think she is challenging white privilege in which white folks are automatically respected for being...white." As a co-author of this article, Tigist was also part of this conversation and commented that "this is not only a statement but a life experience. On a daily basis we all encounter and experience racism in different ways and we always demand to be respected as who we are. This

is another level of conversation talking back to racism and provoking 'if I was white, you would have respected me differently' that is the irony of this picture and that is what makes this very powerful."[21]

The above example shows how "online" civil, political and social participation is dynamic and constantly straddles geographical locations, citizenship, gender and age. The critique of globalised discourses in many of the above becomes an important critical resource for young women to formulate insights into power that resonate with their own experiences. Engaging with such resources is crucial when the internet and traditional media reinforce objectifying, demeaning and disempowering images of young women in the global south. These relentlessly position young women as objects of others' interpretations, rather than as subjects who actively identify their needs and who they are.

It is noteworthy that in many of the sessions among the ICT project participants, the liveliest and most impassioned debates revolved around choices about the logo for identifying the project we convened. Breaking previous language barriers and their associated power relations which affected other group discussions, during these sessions both students and non-students[22] argued forcefully about how particular images reinforced dominant tropes of masculinity, femininity, race and neo-imperialism. This critical reading of images (of bodies and objects) meant that visual texts came to constitute a more accessible language for young women's political discourse *across* language barriers. While reflections on images still needed to be expressed in speech, visual texts seemed to liberate the constraints often associated with an exclusive focus on language and written text. The responses from Project participants suggest that visual images have the potential to provide valuable sources for deepening consciousness about political circumstances and possibly mobilising young women's activism.

In a book on black US-based feminism published in 2006, Patricia Hill Collins describes the emergence of a new generation of young black feminists, who use the resources of popular and commodity culture to define agendas for change. Collins' work precedes the massive transformations to communicative systems in recent years, transformations which have profoundly affected socially marginalised young people in South Africa, despite the digital divide. While much of this communication focuses on entertainment and self-expression, much of it is linked to broader explorations of how personal

experiences are politicised. The communication and association among young women who use ICTs today do often seem trivial. However, complex forms of civic and political commentary are often embedded in communication which seems everyday and banal.

Self-identification, empowerment and creativity

The section above has raised the importance of identity construction, and the psychological needs among many young women to use ICTs in formulating empowering senses of who they are. Such formulation does not involve only a cerebral response to available images, stories and knowledge. Self-identification can also involve hybridised communication which combines traditional and new media. Expressions of self can therefore entail highly imaginative efforts to represent what "personhood" means, and what realities shape personal experiences and responses among young women.

One campaign in our ICT project involved young women identifying themselves politically by writing down slogans and holding these up in order to be photographed. The aim has been to change these slogans regularly, and circulate them in response to particular local events. What emerged powerfully was the extent to which these visual texts, which can be circulated not only on Facebook, but also on mobile phones, or used on posters, offer the potential for mobilising among young women who often feel isolated because they are different. The starting point in mobilising young women, then, was not to gather a group of young women who obviously self-defined as feminist (which must always be a learning process), but to work with a group of women who, in different ways, felt that they had something important to say which was not being heard and could express this both through writing and through their bodily performance – clothes, hairstyling and image. Scope for experimentation and play with the body's surface is obviously enhanced with Facebook, and many young women simply do not have access to Facebook. However, experimenting with short videos that can be shown to others, or circulating photographs can create nascent political conversations and alliances among young women whose strongest mode of communication is often their inscription of their own bodies.

There is of course a long history of feminist cynicism about identity politics, and the preoccupation with defining the (socially disparaged) self positively with reference to, for example, gender, race, sexual orientation or

age. Nancy Fraser (1995), for example, has argued that the preoccupation with the "politics of recognition," the impulse amongst marginalised groups such as blacks, black women, gays and lesbians to assert positive identities can become an end in itself. Identity politics has has therefore jettisoned attention to the politics of redistribution and socio-economic transformation as the foundation of true social justice. In South Africa (and elsewhere), however, where injustice continues to be predicated on assumptions about person's bodies, a defiant talking back to stereotypes is a crucial cultural response to the broader meaning of "injustice."

Many young women who have been involved in ICT feminist activism have stressed the need for creative and artistic forms of self-expression. In discussions, many have emphasised the need for social engagement, and for an emphasis on fun and pleasure. It is a disturbing legacy of left-wing politics (and feminism specifically) in South Africa that politics has been considered a highly serious business. Entertainment, creativity and personal inventiveness have generally been considered suspect. Certain young women, however, have urged the importance of conveying political meaning through humour and parody, while others have stressed the centrality of creative artworks, music or writing to political campaigns, information or gatherings. Creativity especially has seemed to offer young women scope to imagine future possibilities, rather than to fixate on the problems of the present.

Social media creates enormous scope for imagining the self and new worlds. Gus Silber, a South African journalist who has written a study of the social media platform, Mxit, writes that "On Mxit you can be anonymous, a character of your own choosing, unburdened by the perceptions and expectations of other people" (Silber, 2012: 8). Jane Martinson, turning specifically to young women's experimentation with social media, draws on surveys and anecdotal evidence to conclude that that "few young women identify with the word feminism, fearing it sits at odds with a desire to wear makeup or heels" (2013: 1). Yet she also shows that this does not necessarily reflect their discomfort with dominant gender norms and the resources that contemporary popular culture can provide for unsettling socially prescribed femininities. Martinson's argument allows us to reflect on how platforms such as Twitter, Mxit and Whatsapp provide opportunities for young women to produce intricately layered messages about how dominant discourses of gender and sexuality restrict their options and choices and limit the people they would like to be.

This layering has become evident in the MA research of one of the co-authors of this article. As a young person herself, Monique believes that Facebook has become a platform where her voice and self-image as a confident young woman becomes amplified. She also feels that Facebook becomes an important portal to the multiple and self-consciously performative lives, faces and representations of contemporary young women. Monique's exploratory participant observation has pointed to the importance of incorporating Facebook, BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) and Whatsapp as tools for understanding and interacting with young women today. Her research suggests that the virtual world intersects with the "real" world and how young women express their multiple and often contradictory selves on a daily basis. These tools are part of the social world they engage in, an extension of their embodied subjectivities. Consequently, their expanded embodied subjectivities allows them enormous scope to script and re-script themselves, through photographs, images and text. For many young women, these expanded versions of the self circulate in the pubic sphere as richer and more meaningful versions of the women they are believed to be. Often stereotyped as facile entertainment by older people, Facebook deserves to be acknowledged for providing a new platform and vocabulary for engaging with a rapidly changing cultural, economic and social landscape. Its unique logic derives not only from the new register, forms and grammars it puts in place, but from a very different logic about what communication and self-representation entail: conventional communication assumes a more stable relationship between speaker and listener; Facebook assumes the multiplicity and ambivalence of the poster (and whoever engages with it).

One way of exploring this is offered by Bruce Sterling. Sterling contends that we hide ourselves behind an avatar, even backstage behind our computer screen we are acting frontstage. Our Facebook profile permanently communicates when we are not online – we are acting on two different stages at the same time. As a concept, "avatar" epitomises the whole digitised phenomenon. The avatar is our physical representation in the virtual world; another world in which we can even invent ourselves a new self (Sterling, 2012). In line with this, the virtual world, particularly Facebook, offers young women a space where they are in control of how they want to be represented.

This cyber-optimist view, however, must be situated in the context of South Africa's current realities of growing neoliberalism, ongoing social

injustices and the government's increasingly repressive responses to social protest.

The progressive possibilities of young women's use of new media need to be weighed up against the ways in which ICT resources and tools are enmeshed with commodity capitalism. These relentlessly co-opt resources and messages in the interests of a global capitalist system, for example, the marketing and sale of mobile phones, laptops or software in many parts of South Africa, including the most impoverished rural areas, is a stark reminder that these tools are, for many, simply commodities whose sale will increase profits for privileged groups. Even in the most marginalised areas of South Africa, inhabited by those with basic resources in rural and peri-urban areas, for example, mobile phone and mobile phone service provider adverts abound, indicating how poor people, women especially, are targeted as consumers of, for example, mobile phone, even when many cannot afford these (see De Bruijn *et al*, 2009: 8-19).

Yet consumer capitalism and neoliberalism have also led to unexpected forms of connection and solidarities among many young South Africans. Monique's MA research on young women and body image shows that popular culture, especially as mediated by social media, and Facebook in particular, often uncovers innovative associations and encounters among young women from different social classes. In some cases, this has entailed points of convergence around their shared or similar understanding of gender and sexuality, where in previous decades such solidarities were far more complicated by race and class. At one level, racial and class divides remain, and in many areas in Cape Town have been intensified. At another level, certain forms of communication via Facebook or through Mxit or Whatsapp sometimes offer scope for alliances among disaffected youth who draw eclectically on nonconformist icons or symbols especially along the lines of gender and sexuality. And it is significant that these networks are not dependent on the physical localities that young women share for leisure or living. In this way, social media can offer spaces for association and identification that transcend or challenge prescribed or historically inherited patterns of separation.

Monique's participant observation has also shown that many young women's self-presentation through ICTs often transcends the hard lines of heteronormative styles or prescribed femininity. Within hegemonic or mainstream popular culture, clothes, body "marking," dress and accessorising

can challenge the societal order and normative constructs of race, class and gender. Among her participants, and, indeed, for herself as well, there is a constant criss-cross, a back and forth contestation between conforming and rebelling/resisting. All this is in the name of an effort to be different and to defy the norms of belonging in terms of being a "proper woman," a "proper citizen," "heteronormative," a "typical" member of a certain racial group or community.

Social networking therefore becomes more than a space allowing those who already share certain goals to consolidate their politics and pursue common goals. Rather, social networking – often despite unequal access and resources – is a virtual world in which young South African women can explore and redefine racial, gendered and sexualised possibilities of "selfhood," and through these virtual worlds, begin to formulate utopian ideas about the self and possible freedoms.

It is noteworthy that this thinking resonates with recent arguments in radical and feminist politics. In their editorial for an issue of *Affinities: A Journal of Radical Theory, Culture, and Action* published in 2010, Max Heiven and Alex Khasnabitch focus on a pivotal emerging theme in global radical thought by affirming the role of desire, imagining and creativity in radical politics. From the start of the new millennium, this emphasis has steadily intensified, having been raised by African feminists including Patricia Mcfadden (2003) and Charmaine Pereira (2002). This affirmation of the imagination counters what Stephen Duncombe (2007) describes as the debilitating pragmatism of much post-Enlightenment progressive thought. As he states, within this thought the realm of dreams, imagining and symbolism is almost automatically seen as suspect, reactionary or obfuscatory (2007: 18).

The new interest in radical notions of desire and utopia therefore retrieve dreams, spectacle, envisaged possibilities and symbolism from their reactionary function in conservative myth-making. It is a central argument of this article that new information and communications systems in South Africa, which yield abundant scope for inventive audio, textual and visual creativity, open up many of the possibilities identified by certain progressive thinkers.

Working with young women on social media recently has made it clear that the "politics of recognition,"[23] in the face of the deluge of representations that degrade, misrepresent or silence socially marginalsed women, should be central to feminist ICT activism focusing on youth. Visual

texts, especially photographs or films that allow young women to represent themselves, or to be represented in ways that defy the development industry, or researchers fixated with stories of victimisation, global ideas of stereotypes about African women and the ideas about unemployed young women who drain the country's resources are central ways of talking back to authorities and technologies that seek to control marginalised women's bodies and limit their agency.

It is therefore significant that much "political talk" associated with the project we are involved in takes the form of provocative images aimed at encouraging the viewer to think. With the project's Facebook page, Actifem,[24] these include photographs of black feminists, images of feisty young women's vivid graphic designs with slogans such as "My body, my sexuality, my morals, my life, my choice – not yours" and "Racism, Sexism and Homophobia Are Not Permitted in this Area."

The resonance of images combining very little text are a reminder of the importance of the communicative value of fragments of information in the digitised age. It is possible to see the effects of these as discouraging reflection, promoting information that is quickly digested and forgotten. But the animated responses to many of the short digital activist messages on Facebook pages such as Actifem is evidence of their impact – in politicising groups and encouraging further reflection. The role of the politics of recognition – images and messages that allow groups to recognise an "authentic" and empowered sense of self in the face of othering and misrepresentation – can therefore work hand in hand with broader struggles for justice. Ruth Meena and Mary Rusimbi, writing about Tanzanian women's use of mobile phones and the internet, explore their research participants' life histories with reference to their definitions of "empowerment." Empowerment, they argue, involves their participants being "grounded within" (2009: 205), something which inevitably has to precede meaningfully progressive action. Images and text that convey identity politics can allow marginalised women to trace the reasons for their being subordinated, to connect these with a broader critique of social inequalities and generate a preparedness to act on intersecting inequalities.

Conclusion

Vromen suggests that "traditional indicators of participation that rely on labeling some types of participation as conventional and other types of participation as unconventional tend to both belittle and diminish our capacity to understand young people's participation" (2007: 54). A more important challenge, then, is to reflect carefully on what new communicative forms and meanings are conveying, and on the complex and often ambiguous reasons why these have so rapidly surfaced. Socially marginalised young women in South Africa, as elsewhere, clearly do confront many practical social challenges. Yet to reduce their experiences and expression to clear-cut reactions to "oppression" means missing the opportunity to understand and analyse many of the political effects of what they do with their "cognitive surplus."

Endnotes

1. Co-author Tigist Shewarega Hussen would like to be referred to and cited by her first name, Tigist.

2. Shireen Hassim describes the "fragmentation and stratification" of post-apartheid women's organisation in "The Women's Movement in Democratic South Africa" (2006: 354).

3. These areas include Khayelitsha and Delft, characterised by informal housing and high rates of unemployment.

4. Coordinated by the Bangalore-based organisation, ITforChange, this project facilitates work in three countries: India, Brazil and South Africa. See <http://www.itforchange.net/>

5. See Hafkin (2000).

6. See Wausi *et al* (2013).

7. The title of Shirky's study, this concept frames his arguments about the potential that new technology offers for the popular production, rather than mechanical consumption of publicly available information.

8. See SABC News (2012) and Mdeltshe (2012).

9. For more information, see Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy (no date).

10. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8_0MYzz4cw>

11. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8_0MYzz4cw>

12. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8_0MYzz4cw>

13. Available at <http://www.Women'sNet.org.za/>

14. Available at <https://www.Facebook.com/afroqueens>

15. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/africanheritagecity>

16. Available at <https://www.facebook.co, blackhistoryalbum>

17. Available at <https://facebook.com/pages/Unpacking-the-F-Word/340597015976663>

18. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/WildWomanSisterhood>

19. Availablw at <https://wwwfacebook.com/oshobabe>

20. Available at <https://www.Facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=500163740019989&set=a.340615825974782.70499.340597015976663&type=1&theater>

21. Available at <https://www.Facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=500163740019989&set=a.340615825974782.70499.340597015976663&type=1&theater>

22. All the students speak English fluently, although most speak other African languages. Most of the women who are not students struggle to express themselves in English.

23. The phrase here is used in the sense that Nancy Fraser uses it.

24. Available at <https//www.facebook.com/actifem>

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