Students as Producers, Not Consumers?
Digital Capabilities, Higher Education Transformation and the Futures of Learning in Southern Africa

Jess Auerbach
Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town

ABSTRACT
This paper reflects on lessons learned about contemporary teaching at two very different universities located in Mauritius and South Africa. Thinking with digital capabilities as a crucial dimension of transformation, it traces the evolution of a series of commitments to pedagogy first written up in a Conversation article in 2017, which emphasised the need for undergraduate students to actively contribute to global discourses through both academic and non-academic knowledge production. This paper reflects on insights gained through assignments based on knowledge production, which included social media interactions, academic writing practice and contributions to an ongoing project entitled the Archive of Kindness. These insights call for the development of new curricula-based interventions pertaining to digital capabilities. The paper elaborates upon these digital literacies in light of Sushona Zuboff’s work on the paradigm of surveillance capitalism, expanding this to explore its implications for students located in the global south. It develops the notion of “digital capabilities” as a missing component of transformational discourse and practice, arguing that, without the conscious development of digital capabilities, ontological transformation will be critically stymied.

KEYWORDS
digital capabilities, higher education, transformation, learning futures, literacies

Introduction: How Do We Know?
In Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim Code (Benjamin, 2019) digital sociologist Ruha Benjamin describes a learning, thinking, monitoring and living landscape that is increasingly shaped by technologies that are neither well-understood by the vast majority of people, nor appropriately regulated either domestically or globally. These technologies, Benjamin demonstrates, layer upon existing paradigms of power and control to increase, not lessen, the surveillance of bodies in differentiated ways that protect the economic interests of traditional (largely white, largely global-north) minorities at the expense

DOI:10.13169/INTECRITDIVESTUD.4.2.0081
of the freedom of others. Though initially heralded as “revolutionary” for their ability to connect and flatten differential access to knowledge and power, twenty-first-century technologies driven by the internet have unsurprisingly done completely the opposite (Nyabola, 2018; O’Niel, 2016). Rather than lessen inequalities, recent studies have shown how they instead provide the tools for surveillance on an unprecedented scale with significant implications for what Shoshana Zuboff terms the right to a “human future” (Zuboff, 2019, p. 25). By “human future” she means a future that is determined by people and their democratically elected leadership. This opposed to algorithms serving corporations based in wealthy countries that are understood and managed by a handful of unelected computer scientists whose work on systems such as YouTube or WhatsApp have implications for the lived experience of billions of people.

What does a “human future” look like from the perspective of young Southern Africans entering university at a time of unprecedented digital transformation, and in a special issue such as this one, what are the stakes of exploring this component of long-lasting change? The majority of scholars working in the field of transformation have thus far almost entirely overlooked the digital changes that increasingly define both learning and working (Keet & Swartz, 2015). This, I will demonstrate, is particularly salient in spaces such as South Africa where uneven digital capabilities and access are arguably as much of a barrier for educational and workplace entry as analytically established areas of analysis such as race, class and gender. Where varied digital capabilities intersect (Crenshaw, 1989) with these domains, “transformation”—understood as long-lasting structural and interpersonal shifting of power—can be further challenged. In this paper I draw partly on the Honours thesis of Bafana Monatshana (Monatshana, 2020) who describes the experiences of a small sample of the tens of thousands of university students in South Africa who enter higher education having never had the opportunity to use a computer. Monatshana’s dissertation explored the experience of the South African lockdown for these students, but his work provokes much deeper explorations concerning the digital barriers—and possibilities—of contemporary higher education’s ability to “transform.”

In this paper I draw on a series of interventions at two Southern African institutions of higher learning to explore the implications of the digital moment for contemporary learning. Institution Q was a then-brand-new entity of higher education located in Mauritius that was explicitly Pan-African in terms of student body, and considered itself to be highly experimental. It catered only to undergraduate students. Institution Z consisted of three former universities merged by the South African government in the post-apartheid era to form one “university” but spread across three very different cities—all in South Africa but one close to the border with Botswana and staffed by Pan-African faculty. One of these institutions does not want to be named in a way that is visible to search algorithms, so whilst acknowledging that they are relatively easy to identify, I use the terms Institution Q and Z for algorithmic invisibility.

I use auto-ethnography (Adams et al., 2015) as an entry-point into a discussion of higher education of the future. Aware of its limitations (Flaherty, 2022), I acknowledge my own positionality and that this is an example of “improvising theory” (Cerwonka and Malkki, 2007). I draw attention to transformation not only of demographic representation, but of
ontologies, knowledge infrastructures and the tools of learning that are changing extremely quickly. In describing my own journey as a scholar and teacher who came of age at the strange moment of digital transition, I explain why my approach to students from across Africa who learned with me at Institution Q was against the grain but highly effective. This approach “went viral” but was quickly asphyxiated by institutional logics that could not adapt with speed to the contemporary moment. After resigning from Institution Q, I then spent 18 months working at two different higher education institutions which informed my thinking but are not salient to this paper. Finally, at Institution Z, I was able to explore more coherently students’ digital literacies and abilities to shape, not only participate in, public discourse, through a project called the Archive of Kindness.

Taken together, these interventions offer insight into the challenges, opportunities and changes needed in the structures of knowledge of higher education in Southern Africa at a time of digital transformation that is not yet widely understood. Whilst this is not surprising and is entirely understandable given the rapid changes in this domain, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for deeper and much more critical reflections on students’ interactions with the contemporary technological processes, in terms of content and critical understanding and in terms of how digital capabilities are increasingly critical foundations for the individuals who are assumed to embody successful “transformation” in Southern Africa and beyond. This paper therefore develops the notion of “technological literacies” as a missing component of transformational discourse and practice, arguing that, without technological literacies, ontological transformation will be critically stymied.

Encountering Surveillance Capitalism
Auto-ethnography is a method long-popular in the social sciences which enables a disciplined telling of stories of self that inform a research domain (Adams et al., 2015). It is important to acknowledge that who one is and what one has been exposed to determines, to a large extent, what is perceived in a frame of intellectual vision and emotional readiness (Garcia, 2010) and what might be left outside of it (Flaherty 2022; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Nyamnjoh, 2012; Ross, 2010). In my approaches to technology, transformation and critical pedagogy the particularities of the personal have informed both my lens and my responses. Born into a State of Emergency in apartheid South Africa, I matriculated to university ten years into a democratic country that was neither free nor equal, and I have spent the years since engaging the inequities and possibilities of transformative education. I acknowledge here how the manifold privileges of race (whiteness), class (raised in a household with two cars), education and language (first-language English and schooling in my mother tongue) have all contributed to my personal ability to pass through the world with structural ease. As a high-functioning autistic adult, I am also profoundly aware that a different physical and social environment in childhood might have resulted in me being institutionalised rather than winning prizes for cleverness (Attwood, 2007; Silberman, 2015).

My undergraduate studies in South Africa were complemented first by a masters’ degree at Oxford where the institutional framework rested upon centuries of largely uninterrogated western epistemology, and then by doctoral study at Stanford in the heart of Silicon Valley. At Stanford, tech-optimism and futurism saturated a particular iteration of the “American
Dream” and compelled careful reflection not on whether, but on how much, of the kool aid of what I now understand to be surveillance capitalism one should actually drink. At the same time, my ethnographic research and personal life compelled me to move in and out of Angola, Brazil and South Africa, and I was in a constant position of comparison and “reality checking” of multiple ontologies and politics of knowledge.

I was at Stanford from 2010 to 2016, a time in which, as Shoshana Zuboff so compellingly shows, the “architecture” of what is now understood to be surveillance capitalism was being refined and developed. Surveillance capitalism refers to the systems and structures largely based out of Silicon Valley that unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data. Although some of these data are applied to product or service improvement, the rest are declared as a proprietary behavioral surplus, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as “machine intelligence,” and fabricated into prediction products that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later. (Zuboff, 2019, p. 14)

Many graduate-school conversations involved ethics, technology and the systems that were being literally built around us and which aimed to predict behaviour to secure advertising revenue for the companies at play. One could make vast sums of money contributing to the development of these apparatuses, but the ethical compromises required were apparent even then. My goal for graduate study at Stanford had been to equip myself with the tools needed for twenty-first-century education, and when my degree drew to its end, a remarkable opportunity opened at Institution Q. Institution Q was a “start-up university” located in the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius, that was “rethinking African higher education” through a blend of Silicon Valley rhetoric and educational promise. I was recruited as part of the founding team responsible for the social science at a time when students in South Africa had initiated two critical public movements. The first, #rhodesmustfall, aimed to upend the epistemic injustices of a canon shaped largely by commitments from and to former colonising powers. The second, #feesmustfall, demanded free access to tertiary education across South Africa. Both were shaking South African higher education (Habib, 2019; Nyamnjoh, 2017). Several members of the founding class at Institution Q had transferred from South African universities at the height of student protests, and it appeared, at least, that “business as usual” could not continue.

Institution Q had, at the time, less than 200 students all under the age of 25 from across the African continent. In our “founding class” of social science majors, we had 16 countries represented in a class of 28. Our students were closely connected through social media and age-cohort relationships to the demands being made for epistemic representation and inclusion through the teach-ins, protests and media engagement of students at universities such as Wits and UCT. Institution Q had promised something “different” based on empowerment, inclusion and African excellence, and for the students as well as the staff, the vision it sold was incredibly compelling. However, the reality was much more complex, and ultimately led to the resignation of the entire first cohort of social science faculty on the same day.
In the process between arrival and resignation, I mapped out a series of “commitments to decolonial social science” that went viral worldwide (de Jong et al., 2019). These were based on both an intuitive and intellectual understanding of what needed to change in Southern African social science. These commitments promised to [i] prioritise open source/open access, [ii] teach beyond English, [iii] have equitable student exchanges, [iv] move beyond text-only sources, [v] work in teams, [vi] have students produce, not only consume, information and finally [vii] focus on ethics. When the article went viral, far from being delighted at the exposure these commitments elicited, Institution Q largely shut them down. The reasons for this have been described elsewhere (Auerbach et al., 2019), but I continued to work with them at Institution Z. This paper focuses in particular on commitment [vi], to have students produce, not only consume, information, and the technological literacies that have emerged as essential in the process of epistemic and economic transformation that Southern African universities are hoped to enable. This is a commitment that I have carried with me and that is now fundamental to my personal practice of teaching, learning and transformation.

Students as Producers, Not Only Consumers

The context of Institution Q was unusual in that it was, and remains, an explicitly Pan-African institution, albeit one in which the scholarship of luminaries in this field such as Kwameh Nkrumah, Aime Cesaire and others was all but entirely unfamiliar to senior leadership. Significant attention was given to amplifying student “voices” and highlighting their success via careful use of targeted media and data analytics. This was effective marketing, but also important as a tool of building self-confidence for students who had largely come from schooling environments that enabled, rather than interrupted, internalised feelings of inferiority with reference to peers in, for example, Europe and North America (Biko, 2001; Mangcu, 2018). However, it was also complex: in a small student body, who was selected by marketing to be profiled, whose stories counted, and how many views, reactions, likes and positive reinforcement students gained from the web had significant impacts on their mental well-being and their confidence about their futures. In order to have their “stories” acclaimed, students found themselves either sharing narratives of overcoming suffering that fit an expected trope of Western imaginations of Africa (Adichie, 2016; Wainaina, 2005) or finding their middle-class relatively happy upbringings not “spicy” enough to gain traction for marketing media.

In such an environment, teaching critical social science felt imperative. In particular, a small group of colleagues were very aware of the need to interrupt the repetition and subsequent internalisation of African identity performance that was consciously directed to an external (funding-related) gaze. We introduced a decoloniality reading group after hours that was well-attended by students from across the institution, and developed a series of African Studies interventions in the formal curriculum. These were designed to help students understand the technologies of imagination through which “Africa” has been imagined both internally and externally (Auerbach, 2020). In addition to group-based learning activities, however, it became clear that practical interventions beyond performative story-telling to a marketing lens were needed. In the afore-mentioned Conversation piece, I wrote:
it’s essential that students start contributing to discourses surrounding Africa as early as possible. It might take years to know how to write a publishable scholarly article—but an op-ed, podcast or YouTube video is not quite so demanding. This allows students to get accustomed to their voices contributing to and shaping public dialogue in and about Africa. (Auerbach, 2017)

The need for students to contribute came from three insights from the initial period of teaching at Institution Q. First, students were on their phones all the time and actively “contributing” to the public discourse on social media. The marketing team were well aware of this and often utilised it in their favour (they also policed and attempted to moderate it when students expressed “brand damaging” sentiments), but in most cases students were the subjects, not the agents, of discourse (Nyabola, 2018). Secondly, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements had highlighted the urgency of changing institutions of higher education through the amplification of epistemologies that Western universities have actively suppressed in the interests of capitalism. There was a sense of urgency regarding the need to listen in new ways and enable forms of discussion against or outside the discursive structures of university ontologies (Green, 2020). Finally, it became clear that amongst this group of students, who came from a diverse range of backgrounds similar to many regional institutions of higher education, many students had little exposure to the back-end logics of the technologies that they used. Even if they knew how to use digital tools, they rarely had a deeper understanding of how, why and for what ends these tools existed, nor how the data extracted from their use of platforms such as Google Scholar was being monetised (Faroohar, 2019) At institution Q, we experimented with having students produce podcasts and YouTube videos, as well as edit Wikipedia. As much as possible and within the confines of our own positionality, we exposed students to the powerful counter-narratives of spaces such as Black Twitter which actively pushed back against both political and algorithmic domination. In retrospect there were many things we could have improved and done differently, but nonetheless we found that being taught to formulate critical responses to the curriculum in this way set students up for careers in content creation. Of the 28 in the founding class, at least half are now “content creators” in domains that include music, spoken-word, video, scholarship and educational resources.

**Active Learning and Technological Capabilities**

Significant scholarship now exists on the weaknesses of “sage on the stage” approaches to learning, and the benefits of “active” learning rather than passive ingestion and repetition (Parslow, 2012; Schwartz et al., 2016). Much of this is grounded in the critical insights of Paulo Freire and Augusto Baol in mid-twentieth-century Brazil (Freire, 2005; Freire & Horton, 1990). At Institution Q, we made a commitment to this practice of pedagogy that required embodied and positioned responses (hooks, 1994) in our classrooms. As much as possible we tried to elicit engagement from students rather than teaching them “facts”. We were explicitly instructed by management not to “lecture” for longer than at most 20 minutes because this would be “boring” and “passive”. Whilst I agreed with management that we should not bore our students, a conundrum that I and other colleagues grappled with was
that much of the “content” that was “elicited” from students was ill-informed at best and at worst repeated potentially dangerous stereotypes or perspectives that today are understood to be “fake news”. For example, when I tasked students in a second year African Studies class with an online quiz in which they had to simply correctly identify the geographic location of countries in Africa, nobody got higher than 50% on their first attempt despite living in an explicitly Pan-African environment both within and outside the classroom.

This was clearly not the students' fault. They themselves were the products of imperfect high school systems and secondary education across the world that has suffered from decades of policy confusion, neglect and underfunding (Chisholm, 2012; van der Berg & Gustafsson, 2019). The pandemic has exacerbated this in ways we are only now starting to comprehend. However, as Jonathan Jansen so poignantly observes in his book Knowledge in the blood (Jansen, 2009) universities fail if they do not interrupt and widen the received knowledges that students bring with them into higher education, and equip students with the tools that they will need for success in practical, scholarly and interpersonal domains. What these tools are is constantly changing and universities need to be flexible and responsive to these changes whilst also performing a gatekeeping role in a knowledge environment that is increasingly complex.

As I have argued elsewhere (Auerbach, 2022), higher education must increasingly curate, not instruct, both students and the public in knowledge fields. This requires changing the way institutions are conceived in the interests of society (Young, 2020, p. 23) which more and more demands accountability from public recipients of taxpayer funding.

The disruptions to higher education in South Africa from 2015 to 2018 are a good example of what happens when universities fail to respond proactively to societal needs. In 2015, it became clear that the language, emotional intelligence and self-awareness needed to address subjects of history, power, inequality and identity towards societal transformation are now essential, not nice-to-haves that can be relegated to the humanities and social sciences. The same should be said of technological capabilities, given that technologies increasingly shape every aspect of our lives, from the social through the political, economic, spiritual and educational. I deliberately use “capabilities” rather than “literacies” because it is now imperative that students are equipped to go beyond reading and writing to making and modifying digital landscapes. Today's university students are the first of a generation of children to have grown up with the internet (Barassi, 2020), even if many in South Africa had limited access given the layering of digital inequity on existing structures of economic and social disparity (Lembani et al., 2020).

In an early edited volume on technological literacies, it is striking that the book begins by stating that there is a “need for a penetrating understanding of contemporary life, more particularly of the culture of the advanced industrial countries” (Borgmann in Dakers, 2006, p. ix, my emphasis). In the entirety of the 334-page text that follows, Africa is mentioned only twice, both times cursorily, demonstrating an assumption articulated by Nanjala Nyabola that “Africa” has routinely been imagined to exist outside of technology by both scholars of Africa located in the West, and Western popular imagery in film, literature and other media. Scholars such as Nyabola have met with significant resistance when attempting to write of, about and with African technological analysts because of a persistent failure to acknowledge Africa's longstanding connectivity (Starosielski, 2015) within the digital sphere.
In the abovementioned volume on technological literacies, Mike Michael observes that technological literacy moves beyond a mastery of technique or the assimilation of technical knowledge. Rather, it also embraces a concern with apparently substantive values. […] If technological literacy is aligned (correlated, even) with citizenship, then we might ask what sort of citizenship is being presupposed. (Michael, 2006, p. 56)

Walter Benjamin’s early scholarship on “the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” (1936) probed how the technologies of the early twentieth century changed citizenship and meaning. By the early 2000s, scholars such as Michael were asking similar, if perhaps less poetic, questions of digital infrastructures and their impact on students’ consciousness as they both used and were shaped by digital tools. These tools include hardware, software and increasingly the algorithms of learning which shape the content of everything from searches to “personalised learning”.

Cathy O’Niel is a data scientist-turned-activist who has looked extensively at what she calls “weapons of math destruction”. An investment analyst at the same time I started at Stanford, O’Niel left her self-reported “high-paying job” to focus on the unintended consequences of the new technologies increasingly defining the world. In her book she describes how the data economy has been developed through conscious choices that lift some results over others for logics that are often opaque to those not intimately familiar with the system as computer or data scientists. These choices in terms of visibility, information and hierarchies have profound real-world consequences (O’Niel, 2016).

As I tried to develop curricula based on “active learning” for my students on the island of Mauritius at Institution Q, I found myself confronting the intersections of uneven technological encounters, emerging citizenship and global hierarchies of power. Whilst my students could formulate appealing Instagram posts, none of them understood the algorithms that determined what was successful and what was not. When we drew upon public resources such as Wikipedia, we confronted the unbearable whiteness of so much of the English-language internet (Benjamin, 2019; Nyabola, 2018, 2021; O’Niel, 2016; Rufalow, 2020). This is yet another level of the multitude of ways in which, drawing on Sarah Nuttall’s edited collection Beautiful ugly: African and diaspora aesthetics “the hermeneutic machine of the West has long relied on Africa’s otherness to stage its grandest and most exclusive theatres of the self” (Nuttall, 2006, p. 8).

Over the course of the two years that I worked at Institution Q, it became increasingly apparent that technological capabilities were critical to transformative learning. If students were to contribute to public debates effectively, they needed to understand the basics of how technology functions, its end goals and the ways in which platforms developed in the global north served the economic and imaginative interests of extractive economies of behavioural surplus (the digital traces left behind by internet use that can be monetised by corporations). Indeed, as is increasingly coming to light, given weaker technological regulation infrastructures, “Africa” as both a geographic and an imaginative space is being used as a testing ground for digital political experimentation with very serious analogue consequences (Ekdale & Tully, 2020; Nyabola, 2021).
At the end of 2019, when I returned to South Africa, I could not have imagined Covid-19. The pandemic would thrust the questions I had been grappling with into centre stage of education debates worldwide. It would compel a much deeper engagement with digital capabilities in the context of a global emergency—a conversation that hopefully continues to remain vibrant and present (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). In the following section, I describe a pedagogic experiment that took place at Institution Z which combined digital capabilities development, scholarly training and citizenship transformation through an interactive project called the Archive of Kindness. Elsewhere I have described how this project enabled me to consolidate what I have called a “pedagogy of hyperlinkages” (Auerbach, 2022) which reflects on the technicalities of the course process. Here, I focus on one example of how emerging pedagogies that combine the digital and the analogue and can support contemporary transformation efforts, and must now also engage the digital sphere.

Towards Digital “Transformation”

Institution Z is a large South African public university that spans two of South Africa’s nine provinces. It is the result of a merger of three radically different higher education entities that served distinct populations of students during the apartheid era. Today, its student body when read across the three campuses is one of the nations’ most diverse and most inclusive, though the reality is more complex at a campus-based level where one campus caters to an integrated student body, one campus caters to almost entirely black students, and a third campus serves a largely white, Afrikaans-speaking population. It was to this latter campus that I was appointed in July 2020, having never even visited the physical campus due to travel restrictions and national lockdowns linked to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the context of what was understood as “emergency remote teaching” I was given two classes in my first semester as a staff member in anthropology. The first was a straightforward Honours anthropology class with a small set of postgraduate students who could meet regularly online. The second was a “service course” aimed at students in the Graphic Design programme titled the Anthropology of Film and Media that was supposed to equip students on a professional track to think critically about people, technology and communication. The existing syllabus was outdated, and I was given free rein to revise it, with the contingencies of emergency remote teaching informing certain sudden changes. For example, the course could not be assessed via examination, it had to be offered both synchronously and asynchronously, and there were no in-person meetings allowed.

During the initial phases of the South African lockdown, I had begun a project titled the “Archive of Kindness”. This emerged from my existing scholarly interest in everyday beauty in the context of crisis, and entailed recording “micro-kindnesses” (Laughter, 2014) as they were performed by everyday people during a state of disaster. The project had received some local and international attention, and when planning my new course, it occurred to me that it presented an excellent opportunity to combine curricula imperatives, technological capacity-development and citizenship transformation in one project that under normal circumstances would have been quite difficult to initiate.

Over the course of the semester, each of the 29 students had to complete a number of readings and tasks pertaining to ethics, informed consent, critical reading, interviewing,
active listening and what digital theorist Pasi Välaiho has called “biopolitical screens” (Välaiho, 2014). “Biopolitical screens”, following Foucault (2010) are screens that “create” and “shape” life through the actions that they enable, constrain or surveille. In lieu of a final exam, students had to identify and—with consent—record 50 acts of everyday kindness between people in South Africa. They had to add these to a blog made on the free platform strikingly.com, and they were divided into teams which had to publicise this work using social media (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp) as well as national radio. We worked as a class and in small groups to understand both the practicalities of how information circulates in society, and the philosophically and emotionally loaded questions of why bad, sad and fake news circulates so much more quickly than, for example, stories of everyday kindness. At a technical level we also explored visual literacies, stereotypes and the politics of representation (Pink et al., 2016), particularly as they applied to representations of and in Africa, and especially South Africa.

Of salience here are three main points. First, echoing numerous studies on digital critical reading and capabilities, these particular students were ill-equipped to read critically online (Kirschner, 2013) or to evaluate the relative strengths or weaknesses of online sources (Breakstone et al., 2018). It must be acknowledged that thus far the majority of studies of digital literacies and capabilities focus on students in wealthy, highly networked societies (Rufalow, 2020). There is a significant gap in the academic record with regard to the digital capabilities of students (and citizens) in digitally diverse technoscapes such as South Africa, though a slowly growing scholarship is now beginning to address it (Milan et al., 2020; Nyabola, 2021). Just as at Institution Q, at Institution Z (despite being a much bigger, more “established” university), students had very little technical understanding of how the internet works, and few skills when it came to digital evaluation and quality assessment. This was the case across the board and socio-economic background did not determine students’ digital readiness.

Secondly, the pandemic had heightened an already existing challenge at South African universities, which was particularly acute at Institution Z. This challenge is the frequent failure of institutions to interrupt and expand student’s received knowledge of one another usually shaped in school, family and religious institutions that remain powerfully sculpted by apartheid’s physical and sociological infrastructures (Jansen, 2009). In “returning home” from campus most Institution Z students left a rare chance of exposure to South Africans beyond their immediate social circle, and reinserted themselves into their childhood systems of racial, religious, economic and ideological segregation. This informed their exposure to news and analysis during a very challenging time in South Africa’s history, where not only the pandemic but also a series of high-profile murders in the agricultural sector in the region were having a serious impact on societal health. Effectively, students were living in echo chambers and the homogeneous nature of the particular programme meant that even in the context of university education there was little opportunity to encounter, and respond, to difference.

The final and in my view most important point was that when students were instructed to use the internet differently (to find “kindness”) and guided with regard to how to do so, their understanding of South Africa radically changed. Without exception, students
commented that the project had shifted their understanding and perspective of and about South Africa. It compelled them to explore a multitude of media and social media sources, as well as focus discussions within their own close communities on positive, rather than negative, everyday actions. After a class discussion of the documentary *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020) we explored how algorithms pushed attention and behaviour towards views of reality that kept one online, rather than reflecting societal reality.

Through the course and its project, students came to understand how easily one can enter “echo chambers” where a very particular perspective almost magically becomes “all that there is”. Students interacted with “strangers” of different backgrounds to themselves, and were nudged to enter into empathetic dialogue, shift perspective and simultaneously develop their digital capabilities. That online exposure shapes offline behaviour has long been debated in the context of online gaming worlds (Boellstorff et al., 2012), but its potential when integrated into pedagogy has yet to be carefully examined. At Institution Z, the expansion of “digital” exposure opened up an analogue equivalent with powerful implications for students’ expectations of the future, one another and society. Here again, in retrospect more could have been done to ensure smoother engagement with learning tools. I did not factor in the reality that many students would “rush” their final assignments, leading to some examples of work so problematic that I eventually chose to take the blog out of the public domain. Nonetheless, the project provided valuable material to think with, and the book that highlighted some of the best of their work has been a source of great satisfaction and encouragement to students and the institution (personal communication, 2021).

**In Lieu of a Conclusion**

The definition of transformation in Keet and Swarts’s “Transformation Barometer” (Keet & Swartz, 2015: 18–19) includes reference to inclusion, equity, access, Africanisation, justice, authority, pedagogy and relationships, but it does not yet acknowledge the changed information environment in which we now find ourselves living and working. Students are increasingly “producers” of content and information as well as its consumers. All too often, however, this knowledge production entails the reiteration and reproduction of narrow bands of packaged content that are controlled by systems of surveillance capitalism that are currently very poorly understood either by students or by the majority of people who teach them.

In this paper I have drawn on experience from two very different institutions of higher learning to argue that the shift to a “digital society” has serious analogue implications for societal transformation and change within South Africa, and globally. Our exposure to information is increasingly shaped by digital platforms, and all too often neither students, their teachers nor society at large have the critical tools to evaluate what they are reading or watching (Breakstone et al., 2021). As students (like others) become increasingly polarised due to their consumption of digital content, interventions to shape their consumption of digital media—such as the Archive of Kindness—become increasingly salient if society is to “transform” in a meaningful way.

Yet the digital is almost entirely absent from discussions of transformation—an absence that, however understandable, can no longer be tenable if we are to imagine effective
interventions in teaching and learning. The Archive of Kindness was arguably only possible as a teaching intervention because of the opportunity opened by the rush to emergency remote teaching in the Covid-19 pandemic. At Institution Q, we were far more constrained by the formal curriculum. Nonetheless, this paper has shown that at both places it was possible to make small but significant changes in existing structures of learning.

In lieu of a conclusion, I therefore end this paper not with answers but with five critical questions. I invite readers, scholars, digital practitioners and learning centres to think with me about their implications for the future.

What are the implications of digital capabilities for contemporary citizenship in South Africa? As we increasingly comprehend the power and influence of surveillance capitalism, where, how and with whom is or should lie the authority to “shape the internet” and what is the place of student consumption—and production—within those processes?

In a society such as South Africa where “transformation” is a widely accepted national imperative, how do we address the tendency of existing digital infrastructures to echo and amplify sameness, rather than expose people to difference and nuance? What are the implications of this for transformation as it has been understood to date? How does the perspective from South Africa contribute to global conversations about transformation?

What kinds of interventions might realistically, ethically and compassionately be made to expand students’ exposure through the internet to questions, experiences and communities that their analogue lives make inaccessible—whether that be to embodied realities around race or gender diversity, or ideological, philosophical or social positionalities?

What should be the role of universities in guiding students and staff through an unprecedented change in the information landscape?

Finally, how do we determine “who knows, who decides and who decides who decides” in a rapidly changing information environment from the global south? With little ownership of the tools of most contemporary learning (e.g. Google) how do we ensure diversity, inclusivity and representation at the intersections of digital and analogue worlds?

NOTES
1. Honours is the optional fourth year of South African university training in most fields, and is a bridge between undergraduate and postgraduate study. It is when students specialise in a discipline and usually when they have their first experience of original research.
2. My use of Pan-African is informed by the visions of early politician-scholars such as Kwame Nkrumah, who attempted to unite the continent of Africa as a social and political power block in global politics (Olaosebikan, 2011). Practically speaking at all three universities, however, it meant engaging deeply with students and staff from across the continent. In both Mauritius and South Africa, this experience is relatively unusual—particularly when epistemic engagement beyond both country’s national canons does take place.
3. In recent years this has started to change, largely led by students in or surrounding the Oxford University “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign. Linked to the South African movement of the same name described in this paper, the student’s calls for re-examining the university have been critical to the formation of initiatives such as Oxford and Colonialism (https://oxfordandcolonialism.web.ox.ac.uk/), and reflective popular publications such as Chigudu (2021).
4. I use the pseudonym of Institution Q for consistency with another publication on this space, and then use Institution Z to refer to one of my three subsequent places of employment. All possible ethical approvals have been provided.
5. The University of the Witwaterstrand (Wits) is located in Johannesburg. The University of Cape Town is where the #RhodesMustFall movement began, when then-student Chumani Maxwele covered a prominent statue of Cecil John Rhodes with human faeces. The protests sparked by these actions were to spread across the country and to a certain extent around the world, forming allegiances with other movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, and arguably beginning an unprecedented scholarly interest in “decoloniality” as an epistemic and practice-based field.

6. Both faculty and students in the founding cohorts had been recruited on the assumption that we would have full control over the curriculum. However, it emerged that regulatory structures would not allow this. Senior management then chose to partner with a British university whose staff had very little exposure to or expertise with the continent of Africa and its manifold complexities. At a time where “decoloniality” was very much under discussion, students had to follow a curriculum and pass exams set within the same national structure that their peers were trying to undo. There were exceptions: Institution Q had control of students’ first year curriculum (used largely to build basic literacies and abilities to give presentations), and in social science we were able to design three levels of African Studies to teach as we wished. We were also formally permitted to “contextualise” student learning material within the constraints of externally set exams and assignments.

7. Here I can only write for myself, but my colleagues included two other women, one a black Kenyan and a second a first-generation Argentinian of Spanish descent.


9. The class was unusual for Institution Z, in that the majority of students in it were white and from middle-class backgrounds.

REFERENCES


