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Decoding news and reception: An investigation into the discourses on selected Facebook news sites around reports of the South African farmland attacks (2017 to 2018)

BY

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

Supervisor - Dr A. Sewchurran:

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DECLARATION

I, **Laila Sheik**, declare that:

(i) The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work.

(ii) This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

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Place: Amanzimtoti, Durban.

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I am honoured to be a post-graduate within the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal and aim to use my achievements to uplift and empower others.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the encoding and decoding of farm attacks in South Africa during the period 2017- 2018. The corpus for analytical inquiry is drawn from the online news sites BBC News and IOL and the Facebook comments they elicited. Data was collected through nonprobability sampling in an unobtrusive netnographic approach. The study achieves theoretical triangulation by an application of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory of reception as well as critical discourse analysis to the same corpus. Van Dijk's (2001) ideological squaring was a useful heuristic to map the polarized ideological divide between white farmers and their support groups and black farm workers and their sympathizers. Rhetorical tropes of card stacking plain folks, emotional stereotypes and ad hominem fallacies as well as the use of celebrities were used to foreground the plight of white farmers in a hyperbolic claim of "white genocide". Backgrounded in this discourse was the inequity stemming from blacks being dispossessed of land, white farmer assaults on black farmworkers and the exploitative economic relations that trapped farm workers in a cycle of poverty. Facebook inadvertently reinforced these polarised perspectives by algorithmic curation of news manifest in the form of filter bubbles and echo chambers that isolated users from alternate views. Hall's theory of encoding/decoding showed that interpretation of the corpus emanated from individual subjectivities which ventilated pre-existing bias by hegemonic and negotiated readings when news corresponded to their interest and oppositional readings when it did not. Both critical discourse analysis and Hall's encoding/decoding theories, when viewed in relation to citizen journalism in the form of Facebook comments, decentered the role of BBC News and IOL in communicating hegemonic ideologies and messages to consumers.

IQOQA

Lolu cwaningo oluyikhwalithethivu lucubungula ulwazi lokuhlasela emapulazini aseNingizumu Afrika okwenzeka ngeminyaka ka-2017 kuye ku-2018, ngokukhoda ulwazi bese luphinde luguqulwa ukuze lwakhe umqondo ozwakalayo. Ulwazi olubhalwe kulolu cwaningo luhlanganiswe lwadidiyelwa ngokusebenzisa indlela yokuhlaziya sakuphenya, kwabhekwa izindaba ezitholakala ko-inthanethi, kumawebhusayithi ezinkampani zezindaba i-BBC kanye ne-IOL. Olunye ulwazi luqoqwe kulokho okuphawulwa ngabantu ku-Facebook. Ulwazi luqoqwe ngokuthi kusetshenziswe indlela engahleliwe yokuqoqa ulwazi futhi kusetshenziswe injulwazi yokuqoqa izimvo zabantu abaziveza kwezokuxhumana eyaziwa nge-netnographic approach. Lolu cwaningo lusebenzise inhlanganisela yezinjulalwazi okubalwa kuzo eka-Stuart Hall emayelana nokukhoda nokuhlakaza ulwazi luzwakale, kwaphinde kwasetshenziswa i-critical discourse analysis ka-Van Dijk ukubheka ukuhlukana ngokobuhlanga nangokwenza phakathi kwabalimi abamhlobe nabasekeli babo uma beqhathaniswa nabasebenzi abamnyama nabasekeli babo. Izingathekiso eziyihaba zokusabalalisa imfundisoze, inzwabethi, inkoloze, uhubhe lukabhejane nokunye okungenabuqiniso, yizinto lezi ezazifunzwa umphakathi kusetshenziswa osaziwayo ukusabalalisa amampunge athi abalimi abamhlophe babulawa ubuthaphuthaphu emapulazini. Imbangela yakho konke lokhu ukungalingani okukhona phakathi kwabalimu abamhlophe nabantu abamnyama abaphucwa umhlaba wabo, ukuhlukunyezwa nokusetshenziswa kwabantu abamnyama ngabelungu ukubakhela inzuzo emapulazini, konke lokhu kucindezela impumelelo yabantu abamnyama, kubenze babe yizigqila zobubha. Izinkundla zokuxhumana ezifana no-Facebook zibukeka zikusabalalisa kakhulu lokhu kwehlukana ngenxa yokuthi uma kukhona ozwakalisa uvo oluhlukile eningini, uvo lwakhe alukutholi ukuxhaswa. Injulalwazi ka-Hall yokukhoda nokuhlunga ulwazi ngendlela ezwakalayo iveza ngokusobala ukuthi izimvo zomuntu ngamunye ezithanda ukwehluka zithola ukucindezeleka bese kuqhuma izimvo lezi ezithathwa njengeziyizo futhi ezilandelwa wuquqaba. Kokubili i-critical discourse analysis kanye nenjulalwazi ka-Hall, uma kubhekwa ngokuqhathanisa izimvo zezinhlelo zezindaba ezifana no-BBC no-IOL kanye nezimvo eziku-Facebook, konke kuveza khona ukuthi imicabango yoquqaba iyona elalelwayo ukwedlula eyalabo abanezimvo ezahlukile.

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TABLE OF CONCEPTS

Algorithmic Curation	The idea of constructing and serving digital experiences based on a user's behaviour
Algorithms	Algorithms can be understood as a system of criteria that assist in the selection or exclusion and disseminating of material
Corpus	A collection or body of knowledge or evidence
Digital Journalism	Journalism is information which is published on a variety of platforms, and digital journalism emerges from these published contents, on online networks, social media and blogs.
Echo Chambers	A situation in which beliefs are reinforced by repetition inside a closed system, resulting in the assumption that every person thinks the same and that alternative perspectives do not exist
Epiplexis	A rhetorical device used by the speaker in order to incite and convince the audience
Filter Bubbles	"Filter bubbles" occur when a search engine uses an algorithm to personalise online content based on data collected on the users preferences, location and selected content which the user has clicked on, as well as search history.
Glen Grey Act	The Glen Grey Act of 1894 established an individualistic take on land, rather than the African communal way of living, by introducing a labour tax. This forced Xhosa men into labour on farms, with the key intention of population control.

Hegemony	Concept describing how dominant groups persuade subordinate groups to accept their moral, political and cultural values
Ideological square	Positive self- presentation and negative other-presentation suggested by social identity theory
Native Land Act of 1913	This law incorporated territorial segregation into legislation for the first time since the Union in 1910. The law created reserves for Blacks and prohibited the sale of territory in White areas to Blacks and vice versa
News	Used in the context to deliver tidings and "newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent events"
News Discourse	News discourse has been defined by Parker (1992) as a collection of meaningful text
Sensationalism	Sensationalism is effectively a word that has been associated with tabloids and entertainment-styled newspapers. It can be further seen as projecting editorial bias in mass media and over-hyped topics that are strategic to increasing viewership. It focuses on insignificant or trivial matters and events that do not influence mass society
Social Media	Provides access to a global stream of communication whereby the world is unified through communication
Trending Topics	The Trending Topics page is an attempt to balance out the feed, by injecting hard news into the algorithms to incorporate more news media into the social platform

ACRONYMS

ANC	African National Congress
BBC News	British Broadcasting Corporation
BLF	Black First, Land First
IOL	Independent Online
MOS	Man-on-the-street
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SNS	Social Networking Sites

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the dissertation. It begins with the general background of the study. It then discusses the purpose of the dissertation, the research objectives, research questions and location of the study. Finally, an overview of the structure of the dissertation is provided to guide the reader through the literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, analysis, findings and concluding remarks.

The focus of the study is the farmland murders between 2017-2018. These years were chosen to delimit the study and the rationale for doing so was that in these particular years significant events pertaining to the farm attacks in terms of judicial processes and criminal perpetrations were noted. This study should make a contribution to the existing scholarship on the topic by using perspectives drawn from critical discourse analysis and Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding in its critique.

Background to the study

Surveying the stories around the farmland attacks suggests that the narratives around these attacks are politicised and racialised. These polarised views and controversy about farmland attacks therefore warrant scholarly attention. Consequently, my research attempted to provide an analysis of the South African farmland attacks (2017- 2018) using a case study approach. The analysis was done using content posted on Facebook, in the IOL and BBC News pages. Selected news items were analysed to provide an understanding of the reception of news and the effects of citizen journalism. In addition, to enrich the data, intertextual connections to other online news items between 2019 and 2020 were made to strengthen the analysis of the study.

In order to gain insight into how the farm attacks were encoded and decoded on social media required a critique of contesting political agendas and a contextual understanding of colonial and apartheid dispossession of land in South Africa. These attacks can be considered as a post-apartheid phenomenon, and have become a racial flashpoint both locally and internationally (Pierce, 2016 p. 1). This should be understood, with the knowledge that today, nearly a quarter-

century after the first democratic elections, black South Africans, who comprise 80 per cent of the population, still own just 4 per cent of the land (Mahr 2018).

Jonathan Jansen's comments are insightful in this regard:

> I read Afrikaans and English newspapers. You might as well be reading about two different countries when it comes to death. In the past few weeks, the Afrikaans papers have led with horrific stories of farm deaths including hours of torture and cruelty. Such reports are accompanied by graphic images of death and wrenching photos of weeping relatives. They are heart-breaking, these images of farming families slaughtered on their properties. Then comes the politics. Right-wing groups mobilise to present these tragic deaths as an assault on the white race. Local and international websites peddle a narrative of black revenge on white bodies. These blacks don't just kill, they "martel "(torture) their victims to make a point. To ordinary white citizens reading these almost daily accounts of farm murders in Afrikaans newspapers, it certainly feels as if these brutal killings are about them (2017).

Purpose of the study

The study aims to investigate the farmland attacks in South Africa between 2017 to 2018 by analysing the news discourses and reception on Facebook. It intends to contribute to the literature on the farmland attacks from a South African media and cultural studies perspective.

Research objectives

The key objective is to investigate selected farmland attacks between (2017-2018) on the Facebook pages of two online news organisations: IOL and BBC News and to analyse these news stories through critical discourse analysis and Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding.

Research questions

1. What does a semiotic analysis of selected news items about the farmland attacks on the Facebook sites of IOL and BBC News (2017-2018) indicate?

2.1 How do users respond to news about these farmland attacks in the selected news sites on Facebook?

2.2 Why do users respond the way they do?

Location of the Study

The study is located within an online social media site, using the Facebook pages, IOL and BBC News, in South Africa between 2017 and 2018. A brief discussion of the online news portal will be instructive in terms of ownership, production and consumption.

IOL

Independent Online, or IOL is a news and information website based in South Africa. It was previously owned by Independent News and Media , which is the largest publisher of print material in South Africa. It was bought by Sekunjalo Investments in 2013.

> Sekunjalo Independent Media owns 56 per cent of the company, the Public Investment Corporation of South Africa owns 25 per cent , and two Chinese State Owned Enterprises (China International Television Corporation and the China Africa Development Fund) own the remaining 20 per cent of the newspaper. The site serves the online versions of a number of South African newspapers, including *The Star, Pretoria News, The Daily Voice, Cape Times, Cape Argus, Weekend Argus, The Mercury, Post, Diamond Fields Advertiser, Isolezwe, Daily Tribune, Sunday Tribune, The Independent on Saturday*, and *The Sunday Independent*.

Content on IOL is primarily generated by a team of digital journalists. Articles are also curated from various media houses, including Independent Media, African Community Media and the African News Agency, and syndication services like Reuters, Washington Post, Xinhua and IANS. The website claims that:

> IOL's RSS feed is free content from your favourite Independent websites to your feed reader. Our feed contains headlines, a summary or teaser paragraph, and a link to the article on the website. You are also welcomed to use our RSS feeds to display our content on your website, but only if your website is not used for commercial purposes (IOL).

BBC News

The British Broadcasting Corporation is one of the largest broadcasting news stations in the world. The BBC's stated objective is to "provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them". https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc The BBC offers an international perspective into the farmland attacks and the way in which the issue is represented from a global perspective. Whilst the BBC does not censor, or change results, the algorithms used tend to give greater weight to national and international sources over regional or local ones. https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc

The BBC News website presents itself as a dominant post and hard news capture, responsible for gathering and broadcasting news events and current affairs . The BBC News articles rely significantly on images to communicate their news events. The headlines have a news flash which does not give away details about the news event. However, through the use of images and text on their posts, more information is discerned with the combined use of news discourse types and mediums. The real-life images portray graphic events of hard news and updates on similar or the same news pieces as seen above. The use of graphic images can be linked to Bednarek's (2016) study regarding news on social media, that maintains that these images as seen on the BBC page generate 'high-arousal' emotions of sadness, shock, and anger and that this is effective in sparking outrage, interactivity, and engagement from audiences. This effectively captures the discursive news values of impact and negativity. The BBC News posts bring to life the essence of social media news, as not having to be a complete, full report of a news story or event they make significant use of 'updates' on trending news.

Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter One

The dissertation consists of six chapters. Chapter one introduces the research topic and provides a general overview of the study.

Chapter Two

The second chapter is a review of relevant literature.

Chapter Three

The third chapter presents the theoretical framework. It outlines the use of critical discourse analysis and reception theory and establishes a justification for their use.

Chapter Four

This chapter discusses the methodology used.

Chapter Five

The analysis and findings of the study are discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Six

This chapter concludes the study, summarising key features and reflecting upon its limitations and implications.

This concludes the structural breakdown of the study. The next chapter will present the literature review.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review involves a critical evaluation of available and pertinent literature about the farmland attacks in South Africa. It is structured thematically and consists of four sections. To begin with the study is contextualised as a post-apartheid phenomenon. Then the land issue is discussed by looking at legislation that dispossessed blacks and simultaneously provided a politicised pretext for the farmland attacks.

The next theme is social media, which discusses the representation of news on social media and its reception. Finally, the role of *Facebook* in news delivery and curation is considered.

Contextualising the farm attacks

Morley (2010), in his article, '*Kill the Boer and Bring Me My Machine Gun*', "estimated that an average of two to three people have been murdered in farm attacks every week, prompting some observers to label South African commercial agriculture as one of the world's most dangerous professions". Additionally, Burger (2012), in his report, '*Why it is More Dangerous to be a Farmer than a Policeman in South Africa*', concluded that farm murders were perpetrated at "almost quadruple the murder rate of the general population and more than double the murder rate of South African police officers". However, Pearce observed that "most white South Africans were largely immune to violent crime under apartheid and the escalation of farm attacks" was more in sync with Africans wanting to reclaim what they had lost (2016, p. 2).

> Most farm attacks are committed by young black men. This provided a racial element to the perception of many whites with regard to this violence and has led to accusations against the African National Congress (ANC) by some farmers who believe the government is indifferent to, if not responsible for, the plight of the white farming community (ibid, 3).

However, Benjamin (2004) counters this claim in his article, '*Conviction Rates Increase but Farm Attacks Still a Thorn in SA's Side'*,. Benjamin pointed out that both presidents Nelson Mandela and "Thabo Mbeki publicly denounced farm attacks" and that in fact the "conviction rate for farm attacks has been 'far above' the national average, which some have attributed to 'the political will and resources allocated to investigating these crimes'" (Benjamin, 2004).

This suggests that White farmers and black employees, farm dwellers and neighbours have conflicting perceptions of what motivates farm attacks. Consequently, this dissertation argues that farm attacks must be understood in the context of resistance to minority rule, African land dispossession, rural poverty and opportunistic crime- which brings us to the issue of land.

The Land Issue

Farmland attacks must be understood within a context of politicised agendas of land dispossession as well as acts of opportunistic criminality. It is instructive to look at the history of the land issue in South Africa and the various Acts of legislation that gave rise to African dispossession of land. African dispossession and destitution have their genesis in colonialism. The colonial system of territorial demarcation and geographical knowledge determined the extent, ownership, use, and sometimes the meaning of land (Braun 2014, p. 2). Under the guise of Christianity replacing barbarism and settler agrarian capitalism, Africans progressively lost their land rights. The establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, saw land codified along racial lines in the form of the *Native Land Act of 1913*. This act had its precursor in the *Glen Grey Act of 1894*- the brainchild of Cecil John Rhodes. Consequently, these two key Acts of legislation warrant attention.

Legislation

The *Glen Grey Act 1894*

This Act was named after the area it was initially created for in the Eastern Cape but was then expanded to include other areas as well (Bouch 1993, p. 16).

The *Glen Grey Act of 1894* established a system of individual (rather than communal) land tenure and created a labour tax to force Xhosa men into employment on commercial farms or in industry. Its intended result was 'population control'.

The Act also maintained political control of the growing numbers of African voters. This was done by raising the required qualification of the voter, which was the ability to sign his name, and listing the address of his place of occupation to be allowed to vote (Bouch 1993, p. 3). The *Glen Grey Act of 1894* limited the number of African people who could live and own land and decided who was deemed unfit to acquire land and who had to leave their home to look for employment (Bouch 1993, p.19). It also led to widespread dispossession of African people from their land as more Africans were forced into joining a cheap labour pool.

The Native Land Act of 1913

The Natives Land Act (No. 27 of 1913) was passed to allocate approximately 7 per cent of arable land to Africans and reserve the more fertile ground for Whites. This law incorporated territorial segregation into legislation for the first time since the Union in 1910. The law created reserves for Blacks and prohibited the sale of territory in White areas to Blacks and vice versa. Over 8 per cent of land went to White people, who made up less than 20 per cent of the population. The 1913 Act stipulated that Black people could live outside the reserves only if they could prove that they were in employment (Bouch 1993, p. 20).

The Native Land Act of 1913 was repealed in 1993. The fledgling democracy in South Africa attempted a redress of land dispossession by the following means: restitution, land tenure reform and land distribution.

Mngxitama (2006) notes that Africans interpreted their right to land from a cultural perspective, from merely being African, whereas settlers forcefully took it using firepower and:

legitimated the land theft through concepts of private ownership- ideas hostile and alien to African worldviews and communal ownership, access and utilisation of land hitherto practised (ibid. 41).

Hall claims that apartheid legislation has resulted in African communities being pushed into living in overcrowded and impoverished areas such as homelands and townships:

In addition, capital intensive agricultural policies led to the large-scale eviction of farm dwellers from their land and homes… Only a tiny minority of black people can afford land on the free market (2009, p.1).

Mogashoa explicitly outlined the consequences of this:

With natives generally dispossessed of their land and the Europeans in possession of it, a new relation to the land had evolved. With ownership of the land in their hands, the Europeans enjoyed better livelihoods. Sadly for the natives, as they were landless, they had to trade their labour to generate income (2005, p. 280).

W. J. du Plessis notes that:

"by the time of the advent of the new South Africa, about 17 000 statutory measures had been issued to segregate and control land division, with 14 different land control systems in South Africa" (2011, p. 46). This demonstrates the importance of land dispossession in creating a racially and spatially divided South Africa and provides a context in which to situate the farm attacks.

Conceptualising the farmland attacks

The South African Police Services, Transvaal Agricultural Union SA and others all use the same definition for farm attacks (referred to in the *National Rural Safety Strategy*) as "acts of violence against the farming community":

"acts of violence against person/s on farms and smallholdings refer to acts aimed at person/s residing on, working on or visiting farms and smallholdings, whether with the intent to murder, rape, rob or inflict bodily harm. In addition, all acts of violence against the infrastructure and property in the rural community aimed at disrupting legal farming activities a commercial concern, whether the motive/s are related to ideology, land disputes, land issues, revenge, grievances, racist concerns, or intimidation, are included" (Beukman 2016, p.24)

Burger (2018) notes that this ambiguous definition of a farm makes it difficult to collate accurate statistics on what constitutes a farm and subsequently what constitutes a farm attack. According to the SAPS RSS [Rural Safety Strategy] a farm is defined as:

> "an area of land and its buildings used for agricultural and livestock purposes, including cattle posts and rural villages where subsistence farming takes place". Additionally, smallholdings are defined as "an agricultural holding that is smaller than a farm, excluding smallholdings where no agricultural activities take place and that are predominantly residential."

Burger claims that the grey area lies:

> "in the fact that the classification of what constitutes a farm is inclusive of the term smallholdings, where there is no agricultural activity, is predominately residential, and is situated in peri urban areas" (2018).

Martin Schönteich, M. & Steinberg, J. agree:

> "By singling out serious crime committed on smallholdings and calling it attacks against smallholdings, the impression is given that there is considerably more serious and violent crime on smallholdings than in the country's cities and towns. By combining smallholding and farm attack figures, it is difficult for the public to gain an accurate impression of rural crime" (2000, p. 91).

A study by Pearce, B (2016)

> concludes that although farm attacks cannot be separated from the wave of violent crime that has swept South Africa since the early 1990s, the historical importance of African dispossession and oppression living and working on white-owned farms plays a larger role in the violence than has previously been understood. Forty-five per cent of rural black respondents identified ill-treatment by white farmers as a primary motive in farm attacks, while fifty-three per cent pointed to acquisitive criminality as the direct cause (p.24)

Racial conflict

Mokgoko's (2015,) study also states that "gratuitous violence can also be attributed to apartheid". Gratuitous violence in this context is interpreted as a "deeply rooted hatred for Boers or Afrikaners" (ibid. p. 16). This hatred is manifest in political slogans such as 'one settler, one bullet"' and 'Kill the Boer"' which are synonymous with protests against the apartheid regime. Du Toit in his study, *The Great South African Land Scandal* (2004) claims that:

> "Torture is now fairly routine, something relatively new in South Africa's criminal history. Clearly robbery is not the main motive for farm attacks, and our research shows that farmers feel this to be so. 'They want to drive us from our land,' we hear continuously. The additional problems of intimidation, crop and stock theft, illegal squatting and expropriation legislation all point to this being a fact" (p. 252).

Fears were also ignited by events in Zimbabwe, where the *Fast-Track Land Reform Program* saw White-owned farms wilfully occupied by war veterans. In fact, a NEWS 24 article, *SA farmers under siege* (2000) claimed, "The only difference with Zimbabwe is that there it was overt and blatant and covered by the press".

An alternate perspective is found in Steinberg's study, *Midlands* (2002):

> "Why do they want to kill [the farm owner]? Steinberg asks the farmer's bodyguard". "They want the bush back. Like it was before the whites arrived" (10).

Steinberg also interviewed a farm worker, Sithole who claimed:

> It is difficult to explain to an outsider. Sometimes it is bandits. Sometimes it is that a farmer is cruel, and people want to punish him. But in the main it is because this land once belonged to the [African people] and it was stolen (2002, p.123).

This is polemic when viewed from the perspective of a white farmer interviewed by Pearce:

> "Ask them why they are so angry! Apartheid is over. I don't know what they are still so mad about". (2016, p. 42).

A scrutiny of data suggests that many of the farm attacks and murders stem from African landlessness, acquisitive crime and the struggle against apartheid tyranny. Farm attacks must

be seen against the wider discourses of liberation from oppressive laws such as influx control, the "pass laws, citizenship legislation that declared that black people were citizens of their own homelands (or Bantustans – the former reserves) and not citizens of South Africa; as well as forced population removals" (Pearce, 2016 p.43).

From this outline, it can be inferred that land dispossession of Africans trapped them in a cycle of poverty and was a major impetus for subsequent farm attacks. The next aspect of this review will focus on news discourse and social media and their role in disseminating news about farm attacks.

News discourse

Since this study considers online newspapers as its data sets, an analysis of journalistic discourse must preface a look at social media. Richardson (2006) points out that journalistic discourse has specific textual characteristics and equally specific methods of production and consumption. The language of journalism, its production and consumption and the relationship between journalism, social ideas and social institutions clearly reflects a definite inter-relatedness. Consequently "news production is intimately linked with the actions and opinions of (usually) powerful social groups."[Reference should be here] It is also impossible to conceive of news without the target audience in mind. (2007, p.1). Richardson (2006), points out that "journalism has a formative influence on social values, prejudice, democratic politics and social inequalities" . It is these sets of ideas that validate a study of online news articles in relation to the farmland attacks and the wider discourses around them.

Social Media

Since this study analyses the phenomenon of farmland attacks and their encoding and decoding on Facebook sites a critique of social media becomes necessary.

Contextualising Journalistic Practices in South Africa

This section begins with a survey of journalistic practices in South Africa. This is important because news under apartheid was framed to mark a black person as a disenfranchised 'other' without the privileges accorded to whites. The relationship between journalism and apartheid is well researched by De Beer (2008), Tomaselli & Nothling (2008) and Fourie (2009) amongst others. De Beer's (2008) study uncovered the racial stereotypes that proliferated in news at that time reflecting the racial politics of inclusion/exclusion. The two landmark studies: "the South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC) study on the *SA media and race* (2000), and the commissioned skills audit of the South African Editors' Forum (SANEF)" sought to revise journalism in South Africa by promoting freedom of expression and media ethics in its young democracy. The aim was now for "racial equity and transformation in the media industry, and the focus was on media ownership, employment, media production, media distribution and access to and within the media" (De Beer, 2008).

However, the spectre of racial division still manifests in South African journalism as pointed out by Makhanya (2009, p.12) who writes:

> we should be very afraid of the spectre of racial discourse that is reasserting itself in our national life, as is happening now. Be it in the form of increasingly re-emerging white racism or in pockets of African chauvinism, it is something that can easily throw us back two decades.

This is an indicator that racial bias is still consciously presented in news in South Africa today and should inform a more critical perspective of the newsfeed selected for my study and subsequent analysis.

Digital Journalism (online news)

Online news or digital journalism is information published on different platforms, from digital versions of traditional print and broadcast news outlets to news aggregators, social media networks, and blogs, all available using a single click. According to Newman et al., (2017), "online news constitutes the biggest source of information today, while printed newspapers have seen a significant drop in readership in the past decade". Choi & Kim (2017) points out:

that the variety of online news today has however not only reshaped the way in which we consume news, focusing on individual items rather than on reading the newspaper as an ordered set of news stories, but it has also redefined the journalistic practices in news production. The authors point out how even the core journalistic value of immediacy has taken a new role in online news, referring not to the mere practice of rapidly informing people about breaking news, but to the almost perpetual routine of updating content. Karlsson & Strömbäck (2010) identify interactivity as another key feature of online news: while immediacy allows readers to be informed on the latest news in real time, interactivity allows readers to choose actively the content they are interested in.

Of particular interest to my study is what Kovach & Rosenstiel (1999) maintain, that in order to remain financially viable, news platforms have to compete for readership. Therefore, online news companies are tempted to compromise "values such as inquiry, independence and verification to prioritise eye-catching and shareable content" (ibid). A good example is the recent 'Tembisa ten' stories by Rampedi of a world record of ten babies being born to a single mother which have since been proven to be sensationalism and fake news (Seletsa 2021).

Immediacy, interactivity and shareability are critical to online news or digital journalism. Conboy (2007) explains "that headlines serve three main functions: they provide a brief overview of the main news, they constitute an indicator of the style and values of the news outlet, and finally they catch the attention of the reader". This last aspect, according to Blom & Hansen (2015), is what makes online news articles profitable. Blom & Hanson show how journalists use different techniques to catch the reader's attention with catchy headlines and sensational or provocative words (2015). Dos Rieis et al., (2015, p. 357) support this idea by pointing out that since "people are only willing to spend a limited time for consuming news, it is critical for news sites to have effective strategies to catch people's attention and attract their clicks."

Digital technologies have shifted the way media is practised and consumed globally. In addition, it has brought about serious challenges to legacy media, increased the range of outlets for political discussion and debate, and brought the means of media production into the hands of ordinary people mediating their everyday lives (Mutsvairo 2016). This has ushered in the

phenomenon of the "participatory internet" (O'Reilly 2007)). Social media provided for this change with "free publishing and production platforms" (Lovink & Rossiter 2011, p. 5), in which no professional training is required. "Every person can publish information and share ideas easily and cheaply, and potentially reach a large-scale diffusion through social media" (Baym & Boyd 2012). This is important to this study as it seeks to analyse the responses of people to news items posted on Facebook. An intriguing idea put forward by Ritzer & Jurgenson (2010) is that social media is a process of "putting consumers to work"- whereby the distinction between producers and consumers becomes clouded. Fuchs (2014), using a Marxist perspective, views this as "digital labour"- the exploitation of user's unpaid labour" (Wodak & Meyer 2016, p. 207) whereby "prosumers" are not only the "viewers and consumers of creative content and advertisements, but also the co-creators and co-distributers of the content themselves" (ibid). A critique of this Marxist notion is that there is no coercion to labour- in fact users love what they do and are willing to work long hours for no pay, a phenomenon that Fuchs terms "playbour" (Fuchs 2014). My personal view is that this calls for a rethinking of what "work" is and what "leisure" is in a digital age.

In this digital space, social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp have become crucial for the mobilisation of activists, the expression of solidarity and dissent and have also come to exert an influence on mainstream media.

These acts of citizen journalism bypass hegemonic mass media gatekeepers and use the online space to inspire collective social and political action in their communities and social groups. This is particularly germane to this study on the farmland attacks, their reception and responses by stakeholders, (in this case) to the IOL and BBC news platforms on Facebook. Obar et. al., (2012) and Obar (2014) have shown how media technology facilitate social and political activism in an American and Canadian context. Berteld &1 Stald (2013), Eltantawy (2013) and Castells (2015) have also examined this phenomenon extensively. These studies form a corollary of the social world around the farmland murders in that interested parties can easily connect; sympathisers can simply join in the conversation loops and others can watch and participate in real online scenarios as they unfold. I would, however, caution against the uncritical view that citizen journalism in South Africa is geared towards activism and disparate acts of solidarity in defined circumstances. Let the reader be reminded that not everyone in

South Africa has a cell phone and of those that do, many engage in communication that is wholly personal and that has nothing to do with issues circulating in wider communities and which is agenda driven..

One of the drawbacks of citizen and activist journalism is that it may allow propaganda to masquerade as news. In addition, the internet has allowed for all of us to become authors: anyone can create a blog and put an opinion out into the world, where it can go viral without any fact-checking or editing. What is noteworthy is that by ignoring ordinary citizen voices, especially those from counter-hegemonic movements, conventional media structures have unknowingly allowed digital activism to flourish (Cammaerts 2012) leading to what Yang (2016, p.13) has called "discursive protest on social media united through a hashtagged word, phrase or sentence". Of concern to this study is the proliferation of citizen and activist journalists' views that have framed the farmland attacks in the public imagination in distinct ways. This aspect will be engaged with in the data analysis of this study.

The Representation of News

The media represents experiences, ideas, and topics invested within a predetermined ideology. It is assumed that the media reflects existing reality or mirrors it, but media representations serve to present a specific desired reality or to create a reality. A study by Gearhart & Kang (2014, p. 243) looks at television news and the effects of Twitter and Facebook comments on journalism. The study notes man-on-the-street (MOS) interviews as a phenomenon news journalist incorporate in the process of commenting on user-generated social network sites (SNS). MOS interviews are significant and of great importance in that they represent the citizen's views and voice in the news media (ibid. 244).

Comments on SNSs provide a social experience of news. These comments become an influential factor in the quality and credibility of journalism and highlight the importance of social media news sources (Gearhart & Kang, 2014. p. 244). When exposed to news, audiences process information in dual modes, which can be deconstructed into heuristic and systematic modes, making a social judgment (ibid. 244). Heuristic processing makes use of rules or mental shortcuts in judgment; this links with the understanding and how ideologies are constructed.

Ideologies are considered as social expressions, and a heuristic understanding relies on this to convey its meaning. "This process occurs when people lack motivation or cognitive resources as stated" (Dillard et al., 2007). Heuristic processing is limited in its evaluation due to it relying only on a limited amount of information or even a single cue which can be considered as a single frame in news production, in order to form a judgment on a topic or news piece (Gearhart & Kang, 2014. p.245).

Judgments are formed through processing information, which includes all relevant details, and the audience responds also to the semantic news content. To understand this further,

> Audiences can first try to heuristically process the news with simple cues (e.g., information sources). If the processing does not reach a satisfactory level of comprehension, audiences perform systematic processing to make relevant judgments (Gearhart & Kang, 2014, p. 245).

Journalistic quality is determined by newsworthiness and validity, as well as freedom from deficiencies (ibid. 246). These characteristics of journalistic qualities allow for the understanding of how the news will be received by the audiences (ibid. 246).

SNS Comment Cues: Source Factors and Journalistic Aspects

Heuristic cues through SNS comments may bring about a positive or negative outcome in the audience's perceptions of journalistic quality and credibility. This is based on whether the message being provided is grammatically correct or not, as it is a direct representation of the audience's voice (ibid. 246). News sources from officials are still considered more credible than citizen news. However, MOS is an engaging news strategy in television news as the comments represent the civilian voice as well as spark interest. Public opinion invested in the news is meaningful and significant within the news, given that it reflects the audience's views. It aids in enhancing realism and directly engages with the audience (ibid. 246). "MOS interviews lead to cognitive awareness of the qualitative differences between MOS interviews and SNS comments" (ibid. 247), as MOS interviews are prepped with questions by journalists to citizens. In contrast, SNS comments are an entirely voluntary contribution by social media users. Facebook and Twitter are dominant platforms for news sharing on social media.

Story type of news is differentiated between hard and soft news. Hard news entails news that is more severe and timely, while soft news is more entertainment-based and subjective. The study notes that soft news is a preference of journalists as it is useful in gaining the audience's attention; however, the negative effect of this is journalistic quality being compromised (ibid. 247). Internet lingo entails the language and grammatical form used to engage audiences on the internet. According to theorists Appleman & Bolls (2011), grammatical lingo can be processed in three modes which are: systematic, heuristic, and moderating. Grammatical errors within messages can be understood as a misuse of words and shortened texts. Grammatical errors not only injure the credibility of the message being delivered but they also require more effort from the audience to process and decode the message. This evaluation values the credibility of grammatically correct messages more than a message with grammatical errors. This is significant in the farmland murder case study as hundreds of active users have left comments, some with grammatical errors and some without errors. Besides this factor, essential posts about the farmland murders may be compromised if shared with grammatical errors (Gearhart & Kang, 2014: 248).

Journalistic quality can be unpacked using four analytical factors: quality, liking, representativeness, and objectivity. This contributes to the effectiveness of journalistic quality and news credibility. News credibility falls into two categories of professional credibility and civic credibility. Professional credibility deals with the journalistic skill in keeping a professional tone; it can also be expanded to include six components: "reflecting professional journalism skins unfair/fair, does not tell the whole story/tells the whole story, inaccurate/ accurate, cannot be trusted/can be trusted, opinionated/ factual, and poorly-trained reports/ well-trained reports" (Gearhart & Kang, 2014: 248).

The factors discussed above outline the overall representation, the way information is presented, and the impact of the news based on heuristic processing of SNS comments, story type, and grammatical lingo and its effect on judgments of quality and credibility. However, the use of Facebook in the research is limited, Twitter, however, was noted to be a significant platform in terms of the effect on comments. "The short message length in Twitter might create

traits of breaking news, which can capture audience attention" (ibid. 256). The study notes the limitation in the discussion regarding the combined influence of MOS interviews and SNS sources.

News

From a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective, news involves much more than informing its consumers about events in the world. Factors like the sourcing of news, company ownership, the need to make news "newsworthy" (Bennet & Iyengar 2008, p.715) all play into the shape and meaning of news discourses. Discourses may also be abetted by visual semiotic choices (the photographs and cartoons that may accompany written texts). They assist in foregrounding and backgrounding certain types of information and may express the ideas, values and position of the authors by using visual cues. The figure below provides detail of factors influencing the production of news on social media.

Hierarchical Model of Factors Affecting the Production of Media Content

Social systems	Larger social structure; organisations of media systems (democratic controlled); ideology; economic basis of media production (capitalism, state-controlled)
Social institutions	Journalism and media production norms (reliance on official sources, reliance on advertising, state control of media, public relations)
Media organisations	Expenses, revenues, ownership of media organisations, roles, structure, profitability, platform, target audience, influence from advertisers, and market competition
Routines and Practices	Journalism: News values, objectivity, norms for newsworthiness, timeliness of stories, proximity, fact-checking Entertainment: Casting, hiring of talent, genres of programming, production decision-making, audience research, scheduling, and distribution decisions
Individuals	Individual's professional roles, work and personal background, ethics, personal attitudes, values, beliefs

Source: Adapted from Shoemaker, P.J., & Reese, S.D. (2013). Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective (1 edition). New York, NY: Routledge.

Figure 1: Hierarchical model of factors affecting the production of media content

The integrity of news may also be affected by issues such as sensationalism, hype and simplification.

Sensationalism

Sensationalism is effectively a word that has been associated with tabloids and entertainment-styled newspapers. It can further be seen as projecting editorial bias in mass media and over-hyped topics that are strategically addressed to increase viewership. It focuses on insignificant or trivial matters and events that do not influence mass society. This definition is expanded to include reporting on serious news issues and events in a sensationalised manner in order to attract more audiences and widespread readership. One of the notable factors in the production of sensationalist news is the increased competition for ratings between news organisations and topics that are all aimed at attracting the most massive audiences possible.

"They defined it as involving a shift in the priorities within a given medium away from news and information toward an emphasis on entertainment" (Sparks & Tulloch 2000).

There has now been a shift in the use of techniques to increase dramatisation, appeal-like photo enhancements, re-enactments, and diagrams. Sensationalism targets soft news delivery. It is centred on celebrities, human interest stories, and entertainment news, with little attention devoted to politics, economics, and society. Uzuegbunam & Udeze (2013 p. 75) conclude that sensationalist news items "are the junk food of our news diet".

One can therefore reasonably speculate that the propensity to sensationalism in citizen journalism may distort or exaggerate news events. This is particularly so if the authors are of a particular ideological orientation or in a community with like-minded groups. This concept is germane to a credible analysis of the farmland murders.

Hype

In understanding media hype, "Facebook sits alongside other forms of media industry 'hype' such as entertainment journalism, trailers, and previews, as well as viral marketing campaigns" (Johnson 2017 p. 149). Hype can be contextually understood as a para-textual framing function, which can be recognised as "texts that prepare us for other texts" (Gray 2010 p. 25). These are functional in how they shape our experiences of generating meaning from other media texts:

"As it circulates media entertainment stories, Facebook goes beyond existing as paratexts to instead impose order upon paratextuality, determining what paratextuality experiences users might likely have" (Johnson 2017, p. 149).

Media hype and sensationalism share the same outcome. The word hype can be understood as "to stimulate, to build up, to publicise or promote especially inflated or misleading claims" (Vasterman 2005, p. 511). According to the study, to be considered a media-hype, a piece of news should conform to criteria composed of: "a key event, a consonant news wave, a sudden increase in reports on comparable cases, and a strong rise of thematically related news" (ibid. p.511). Hype plays an impactful role in the social amplification of issues, such that, a crisis is considered a crisis because it is described as such within the media. "In this way, media-hype can create new realities, independent from other non-mediated realities" (ibid. p.517).

Simplification

Simplification is viewed as the incorporation of binary oppositions. This involves stories of crime and conflict, which promote an emphasis on good versus evil (Jewkes & Linnemann 2017, p. 53).

"Such polarised frameworks of understanding result in the construction of mutually exclusive categories; for example, parents cannot also be paedophiles; individuals driven to carry out suicide bombings and other terrorist acts are entirely evil and have no 'good' qualities to redeem them" (Jewkes & Linnemann 2017, p. 53).

All these processes of simplification add up to a mediated version of crime in which "shades of grey are absent, and complex reality is substituted for a simple, incontestable and preferably bite-sized messages" (Jewkes & Linnemann 2017, p. 53). These concepts look at how digital media has minimalised news on social media which must be considered when analysing how the farmland murders have been presented on Facebook.

Consequently, hype, sensationalism and simplification are key factors that may affect the credibility of reporting on the farmland attacks and murders. The curation of news is also

evolved into an "augmented reality" by allowing consumer comments, to which I will now turn.

Facebook and News
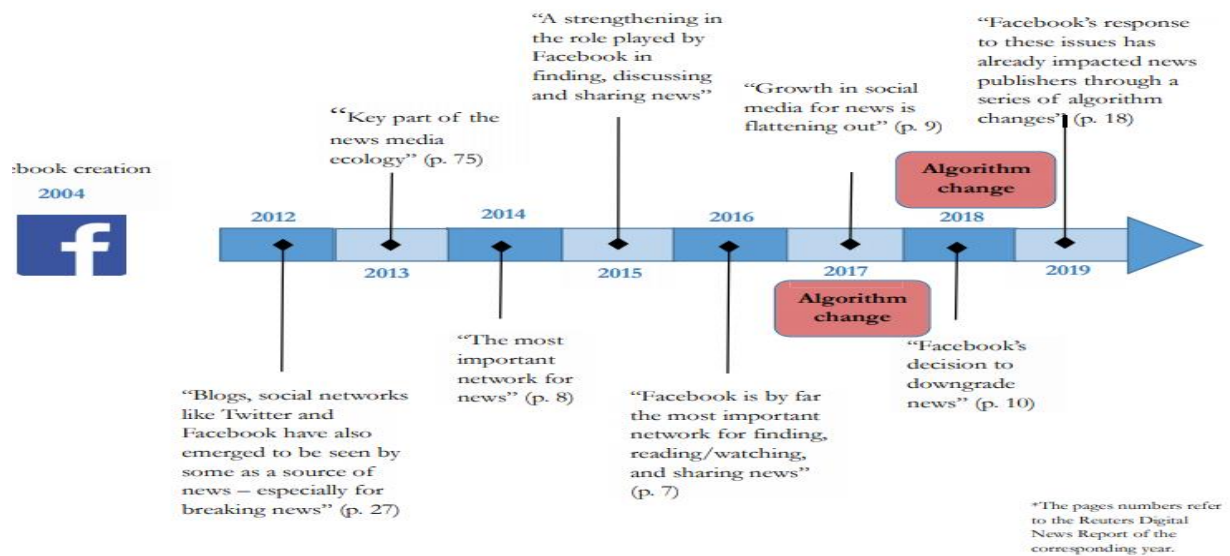
Figure 2: Facebook as a key actor of the news ecology over the years. Adapted from the *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*

This study explores Facebook as an imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice which allows people to gather for social, cultural and civic purposes and which helps people connect to the world beyond their close family and friends (Boyd 2010, p. 39).

"Because Facebook is the most widely adopted social media network, it has the greatest impact on online news" (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan 2016). In addition, Facebook drives more traffic to news organizations than any other social media platform (Amann 2017). Of importance to this study is the way Facebook has changed the relationship between journalists, news brands, and consumers (Thomas 2020). Individuals can be 'friends' with, 'like,' or 'follow'' journalists. Facebook feeds and provides a window into their lives, and their work,

by following what is posted. In addition, anyone with an account on a social media platform can play a role in the news distribution process by posting or linking to existing news stories (Hermida et. al., 2012). Consequently, social media has connected people to news and journalists in collaborative and personal ways.

> Facebook news posts typically include a headline and a summary paragraph, a single image, and the name and thumbnail image of the person or organization posting. Posts also include several quantitative cues indicating how other readers have responded to the post, including number of comments, likes, and shares of the post, engagement indicators that are a new information set for consumers to interpret. Other social networks such as Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat offer similar popularity indicators, though they differ slightly in labelling and the way network members ascribe meaning to them (Kieb & Wojdynski 2019).

Facebook also indexes the content that it hosts. This content can be divided into two types:

1) Messages produced and used to communicate by users (including the news present in traditional media) that will be further circulated by the algorithm to other users;

2) "meta-communication" elements, "such as behavioural and network information that will be algorithmically processed to recirculate the messages produced by users (including news)" (Jensen & Helles 2017, p. 8).

Social media platform systematically collects and stores information regarding its users' actions and behaviour on the platform, through the capturing of meta-communication elements (Jensen & Helles 2017). Users are then situated within their social network in accordance with the user's preferences (Boyd 2006).

Forms of Communication	How to access news
One-to-one	News directly sent by a user to a friend by posting nominatively on the wall
One-to-many	News accessed through the user's newsfeed
Many-to-many	Friends' comment on a news article

Figure 3: How news is circulated on Facebook

This section discusses how Facebook is used for the dissemination of news. Algorithmic curation and code boundaries are explained, including how news is delivered on Facebook though 'Trending Topics' and "filter bubbles" as described in sections to follow.

Filter bubbles

Filter bubbles manifest when a search engine algorithm selectively personalises web searches by basing data collected on the profile of the user such as preferences, location, past click-behaviour and search history. Fourie (2020),points out that :

> "filter bubbles" often result in users having significantly less information about opposing perspectives and contradicting viewpoints, which causes the web user to become intellectually isolated in their own cultural and ideological bubbles. Filter bubbles distort our thinking, our understanding of the world, and hinder our ability to make balanced decisions.

Since Facebook's personalised news-stream curates news with "filter bubbles" it also perpetuates news based on a user's digital profile and preferences. These are inferred from a person's browsing history, age, gender, location, and other personal data.

This ensures that a person sees only 'relevant' results. No two people see the same results when they do a search, nor do they see the same news from their news curation or online newspaper apps. A simple Google search for example, of the same word or phrase by different people would result in vastly different results depending on the profile and history of the users. According to Eli Pariser (quoted in Fourie 2020), "the computer screen becomes a one-way mirror that reflects the interests of their users, while the algorithmic observers are avariciously watching what they click". This personalised ecosystem results in "filter bubbles" where people are rather surrounded with an overload of information on what they prefer to see, and very little of what they should see.

The problem is that filter bubbles create 'echo chambers' (a situation in which beliefs are reinforced by repetition inside a closed system) resulting in the assumption that every person thinks the same and that alternative perspectives do not exist. Eventually a new 'reality' without any cognitive dissonance is created, and people do not even realise anymore that what they see is being filtered. Consequently, the isolation of individuals and lack of exposure to contradicting views lead to deep-seated biases, polarisation of our societies, lack of tolerance for opposing views and a general vulnerability to and trusting of fake news. This has resulted in the intensification of the polarisation, intolerance and violence in recent times during elections, political rivalries, as well as sectarian protests and violence in South Africa and other parts of the world.

Numerous examples exist, for instance:

- The role of the infamous Cambridge Analytica and the use of ads and fake news to prey on the fear of the public and in some measure influence the outcomes of the 2016 presidential election in the USA, the 2016 Brexit vote to leave the European Union, and elections in India, Mexico, Malaysia, Kenya, Malta, South Africa, and about 200 other elections over the world.

- The use of Facebook and "patriotic trolling" (the use of targeted harassment and propaganda) as a weapon by the Philippine government and President Rodrigo Duterte to destroy his fiercest critics and opponents.

- Facebook has been used for ethnic cleansing through a systematic fake news campaign under false names and accounts by senior military leaders targeting Myanmar's mostly Rohingya Muslim minority. Facebook and the various created pages and blogs became the main distribution channels for lurid photos, false news, and inflammatory posts. Several human rights groups attributed the numerous murders, rapes, and the largest forced human migration in recent history of more than 700 000 people, to the anti-Rohingya propaganda. The disruptive disinformation campaigns on Facebook by Myanmar's military are amongst the first examples of the use of a social network by an authoritarian government against its own citizens. Previously Facebook has been used by Russia and Iran to spread false and inflammatory messages to influence people in other countries, while domestic groups in the USA adopted similar tactics prior to elections.

It is easy to see why the phenomenon of 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' are a cause for concern and that detract from good journalistic practice. Fourie (2020) reiterates that:

> In our current volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, we need understanding, clarity and adaptability. True democracy requires citizens to be able to understand and accommodate the viewpoints of others, but many people enjoy the comfort and security of their own bubble. Democracy necessitates the reliance on shared facts, but we live in parallel, separate universes. However convenient personalisation may be, it promotes auto-propaganda and indoctrinates us with our own ideas. Nicholas Carr once said: "We become, neurologically, what we think"

The role of 'filter bubbles' in the covert manipulation of news by Facebook has clear implications when looking at how the farmland attacks are streamed and will be discussed accordingly.

Trending topics

Another aspect that warrants attention is the "'rending topics' feature of Facebook. Alex Fitzpatrick outlines the issue with 'trending topics' as follows:

The real problem with Facebook's Trending Topics isn't that it's subject to human bias. The problem is that Trending Topics is a feature that wants to be two things at once. To Facebook users, it appears to be a list of popular news stories being shared on the site at a given point in time. To Facebook's employees, the feature is an opportunity for the company to exhibit its bona fides as a reliable news source. The issue is that those two functions work against each other. Having human curators separate the wheat from the chaff naturally introduces bias. Curation is simply bias in action. This inherent tension invites problems of bias and manipulation (2016).

This understanding suggests to me that trending is not an impartial record of popular news and may be open to 'editorial judgement' of what to include and exclude. Naturally, this invites human bias and should prompt examination of the dissemination of news on Facebook more critically.

Consequently, this study recognises that, together with 'trending topics', 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers' news on Facebook may not be impartial. It therefore follows that it could influence the wider discourses on the farmland attacks on Facebook. As such, due attention will be given to these features in the analysis of the relevant data.

Algorithms

The illustration below shows key moments in the history of the Facebook Algorithm.
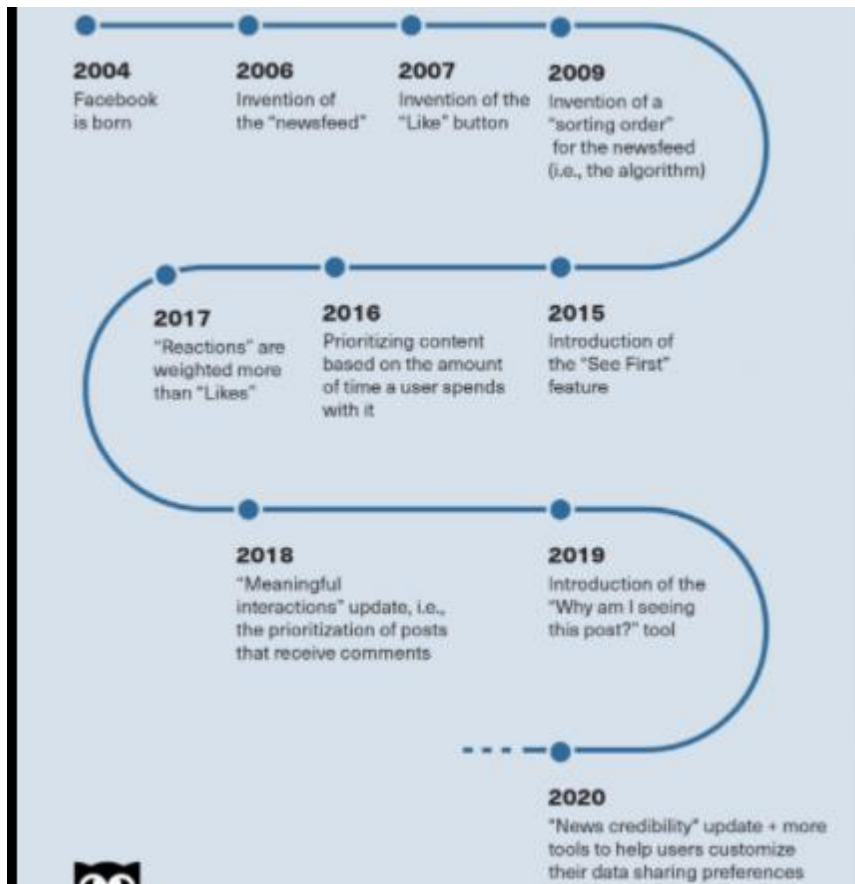
Figure 4: Key moments in the history of the Facebook algorithm (Cooper 2021, p. 16)

Human editors guide the story selection by incorporating news values, which Jerry Palmer (2000) defines as a "system of criteria which are used to make decisions about the inclusion and exclusion of the material and about which aspects of stories to present in the form of news output" (DeVito 2017, p. 754). News selection on Facebook is curated through algorithms, and this process allows all content on Facebook to filter through these algorithms, as evidenced by Sittig & Zuckerberg (2013) and DeVito (2017, p. 754). Algorithms can be understood as a system of criteria that assist in the selection or exclusion and dissemination of material. Understanding the process of algorithmic use helps to contextualise how news delivery and news reception occurs within the public media domain.

Story selection, in the Facebook news feed, as well as reviews, is filtered through algorithms. This process is carried out by "sidestepping the key barriers that arise when seeking a formal representation of the news feed and instead relies on primary sourced documents generated by Facebook itself" (DeVito 2017, p. 754). This aids in an information mediator that carries out story selection and directs the flow of news information.

The study by Weber & Kosterich (2018), C*oding the News*, discusses algorithms as an autonomous decision-maker which is reflected in an algorithm's "ability to prioritise, associate, filter and summarise information" (ibid). "Code is used to program and automate the instructions contained in a particular algorithm"(ibid.). However, Diakopoulos (2015) questions the use of algorithms in its limitations of transparency and the potential for embedded bias. Within Facebook, content is curated by using code; for instance, on how an article is selected and what portion of the content is presented to the user (Weber & Kosterich 2018, p. 312). Ananny & Crawford (2015) found that news applications, focus on code specifically for personalisation algorithms instead of journalistic standards, and that they prioritise content based on relative importance. Three thousand lines were analysed, and coders identified core functions that carried out editorial processes of sorting, filtering, and prioritising the presentation of news articles (Weber & Kosterich 2018, p. 314).
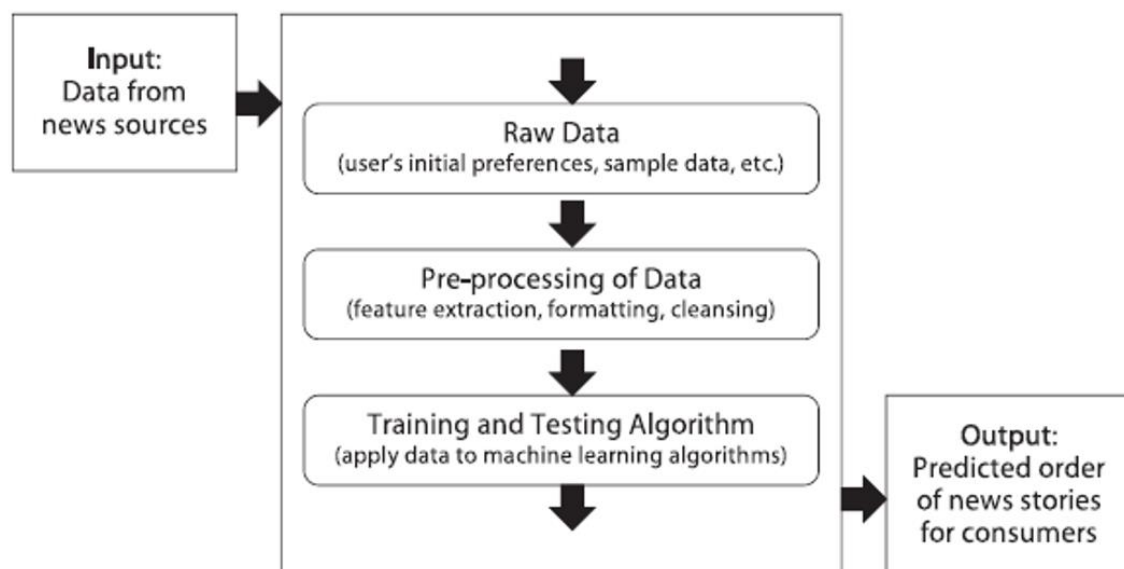
Figure 5: overview of algorithmic process of news production (Weber & Kosterich 2018, p. 317).

DeVito (2017) investigated a content analysis of Facebook's patents and press releases to derive the algorithmic values used to inform news selection. These can be contrasted with traditional news values centered around "novelty or oddity, conflict or controversy, interest or importance, impact or consequence, sensationalism, timeliness and proximity" as stated by Lee (2009, p. 3). The majority of the research was centred on the concerns about the algorithmic selection in entrapping people in filter bubbles due to the automation in collecting past behavioural interactions carried out online (DeVito 2017, p. 756). In collecting and analyzing the data I intend to be mindful of this phenomenon as it impacts the encoding and decoding of reports regarding the farmland attacks and murders.

Algorithmic Curation

A critical combination of news values determines the relevance of a news piece. However, there is some element of bias embedded within it. "Relevance is a construct and is highly subjective when a defined criterion is absent" (DeVito 2017, p. 755). With regards to Facebook, the algorithm determines what is relevant. This is not an uncommon practice within news selection because traditional mass media is similar in using such practices where publishers select what they consider to be the most relevant news information to include in newspapers. The news values dictate the terms in which pieces of news are selected for publishing in a semi-transparent manner (DeVito 2017, p. 755).

Algorithmic Values

It is understood that algorithms have biases embedded within them, as they are created by human editors (ibid. 756). Accompanying this, is an added technical bias that comes from the technology itself. This can be from the storage space and processing power, as well as any errors within the coding. Friedman & Nussbaum (1996, p. 331) refer to "pre-existing bias, which derives from an individual or societal input into the design of a system". Algorithms can be summed up as human constructs being operationalised. For instance, the study uses Facebook as an example when it prioritises close friends and their posts, which requires engineers to decide on the criteria that define 'close friends' from acquaintances to allow for a more engaging experience (DeVito 2017, p. 756).

Facebook can essentially be deconstructed as a business, its product being the content in news feeds that attracts advertisers to serve their business interests. The algorithms aid in that they identify pre-existing product preferences through continued user input and direct interactions between users. However, Facebook also needs to prioritise cooperative partners through programs like Instant Articles, as mentioned by Somaiya et al., (2015).

A study by Diakopoulos (2015) identified points of each primary function of algorithms, these being prioritisation, classification, association, and filtering. Algorithms have a 'black box' nature in which the setup is intended to be obscured from public view. This results in the news feed being protected and obscured:

> is such a complex system that even those within Facebook and the News Feed team may have no clear picture of how it works on an individual basis (Napoli 2014). From a traditional research standpoint, the News Feed is unaccessible (DeVito 2017, p. 758).

A study by Weber & Kosterich (2018) discusses the function of computer code in filtering and distributing news. The study provides a framework that is useful in understanding algorithmic journalism and code boundary features. Algorithmic journalism is recognised as the automation of processes that were previously performed by editors and journalists in newsrooms (Weber & Kosterich 2018, p. 312). Another definition by Diakopoulos (2015, p. 400), defines algorithms as "autonomous decision-makers". It is a feature that works by prioritising, filtering, and summarising information through the use of code. The limitation with coding and the use of autonomous algorithms is the lack of transparency and potential bias (ibid. 402) which leads to the next section on coding in which I demonstrate ABC.

Code boundary

Code is used in curating content such that it is designed to decide what content to push and which portion of the material to display to audiences (Weber & Kosterich 2018, p. 312). Ananny & Crawford (2018, p. 313) found that creators of news applications focused on code, with a focus on personalised algorithms and relational databases, rather than on journalistic standards and relative content importance.

The study by Weber & Kosterich (2018) investigated coders, who reviewed more than 3000 lines of code and found the core functions that it performed. Facebook has been considered to seize "the platform and audience that news-media outlets could once only command" (Weber & Kosterich 2018, p. 149). Facebook's roles were primarily centred on entertainment and communication; more explicitly, entertainment products and creating narratives that shape audience engagement, as well as other media spaces concerned with interactivity.

"Facebook incorporates media industry hype such as entertainment journalism[REFERENCE MISSING] The social media platform organises all forms of publicity and promotions, as they are presented to be experienced by online users. These are reflected as paratexts, which are understood as texts preparing a user for other texts. Hype asserts an air of interest among users such that it shapes users' experiences by focusing on some texts whilst excluding others. Therefore, Facebook news feature functioned on an engineered algorithm that was intended to act as a gatekeeper for selecting and presenting news to audiences (Weber & Kosterich 2018, p. 149).

Summary

The literature review has looked at four key aspects; contextualising the farm attacks, the land issue, social media, and Facebook. The land issue has been discussed in the context of land dispossession and the corresponding quest for land restitution. Social media looks at coding and content curation as well as how digital journalism has impacted on the news, its reception and dissemination, Facebook was then discussed as a form of news delivery and news reception to subsequently develop the focus of the study. This literature review has critically engaged with available sources about the farm attacks in South Africa and Facebook as a media platform in which these stories were trending. The encoding and decoding of the farmland attacks on IOL and BBC news sites on Facebook indicate a gap in scholarship which constitutes a warrant for this study.

The next chapter is an explication of theoretical tenets used in an investigation of the farmland attacks and builds upon this literature review.

CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This theoretical framework recruits critical discourse analysis (CDA) and reception theory as its analytical tools. These theoretical approaches are used to critique six news articles published in IOL and BBC news pertaining to the farmland attacks. A semiotic analysis (CDA) will be followed by the use of tenets of Hall's reception theory to interrogate the reception of these articles on Facebook.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Van Dijk (2001) defines CDA as follows:

> Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take an explicit position and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequality. This is also why CDA may be characterised as a social movement of politically committed discourse analysts. (2001, p. 466).

Fairclough & Wodak (1997) summarised the main tenets of CDA as follows:

1. CDA addresses social problems;

2. Power relations are discursive;

3. Discourse constitutes society and culture;

4. Discourse does ideological work;

5. Discourse is historical;

6. The link between text and society is mediated;

7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory; and

8. Discourse is a form of social action.

Discourse is therefore understood by CDA scholars as a significant socialisation tool where language, rhetoric, images, and semiotics shape our understanding of reality (Wodak, 2001; Fairclough 1995; Van Dijk 1996). CDA is mainly associated with the ideas of Norman Fairclough,,. Wodak R. and Van Dijk, T. (2001). Each conceives discourse as being "linked to power and social interests" (Philo 2007, p. 176). But their perspectives conflict in notable ways. Fairclough and Wodak's approaches to CDA examine the "semantic and grammatical features of texts," while Van Dijk (2013) "has championed a binary thematic analysis tool called the ideological square" (Philo 2007, p. 178). Importantly, Fairclough considers CDA to be a method, whereas Van Dijk considers CDA to be a worldview or a theoretical perspective for undertaking research. According to Wodak & Meyer, M (2009), "proponents of CDA use discourse analysis to challenge what they regard as undesirable social and political practices" (p.2), meaning CDA is necessarily linked with scholarly activism.

This is just one example among many that illustrates the different points of view in CDA. Therefore, it is important to note that there is no single homogenous version of CDA. CDA comprises different critical approaches (e.g., Gee, 1990; Scallon, 1998; Rogers 2004; Jefferies 2007; Richardson 2006).

The factor that binds these approaches together is that language is a means of social construction that both shapes and is shaped by society. Machin &Mayr point put that CDA is not so much interested in language use itself, but in the linguistic character of social and cultural processes and structures (2012, p. 4). Researchers who use CDA therefore conceptualise language as "an integral element of the material social process" (Fairclough 2001 p. 122), meaning that they "view communicative objects as outcomes and constituents of social practice" (Fairclough & Wodak 1997). Luke describes this insightfully as follows:

> CDA involves a principled and transparent shunting backwards and forth between the microanalysis of texts using varied tools of linguistic, semiotic and literary analysis, and the macroanalysis of social formations, institutions and power relations that these texts index and construct (2002, p. 100).

CDA also assumes that power relations are discursive, in other words, power is transmitted and practiced through discourse "therefore we can study how power relations are exercised and negotiated in discourse" (Fairclough & Wodak 1997, p.272). For instance, "CDA analyses texts that may appear neutral on the surface but may in fact be ideological and seek to shape the representation of events for particular ends" (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 5).

Thus, I will be looking at how these articles and the discourses internal to them, as well as around them on Facebook manipulate semiotic resources to realise their particular interests. Since language is used to reproduce social life, important questions to raise are firstly, what kinds of social world is being created by the texts? Secondly, what kinds of inequalities and interests may they be seeking to perpetuate, generate or legitimate? (Machin & Mayr 2012). Of interest is how news items selected may present themselves as neutral and objective when in fact they are ideological.

Fairclough argues that one can see exactly how ideology operates in language because language is a common social behaviour where people share their views and what seems like common sense to them. When these ideologies become accepted, they assist in sustaining power by dominant groups. According to Machin & Mayr (2012), ideology may obscure the nature of an unequal society and prevent us from seeing alternatives. This is how, according to Fairclough," ideology constitutes us as subjects". Fairclough provides what he calls "a guide and not a blueprint" (2012, p.129) for textual analysis in CDA, which focuses on a discourse's vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures.

Analysis procedures used in CDA are generally "hermeneutic or interpretive and produce meaning" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In general, most approaches to CDA are characterised by:
 (a) problem-oriented focus;
(b) analysis of semiotic data;
(c) the view that power relations are discursive to some extent;
(d) the view that discourses are situated in time and place;
(e) the idea that expressions of language are never neutral;
(f) analysis that is systematic, interpretive, descriptive, and explanatory; and
(g) interdisciplinary and eclectic methodologies (Van Dijk 1993; Wodak & Meyer 2009).

Justification for using CDA as a research tool

CDA is used as a tool to investigate the buried meanings and ideologies manifest in the corpus of material under study. CDA also focuses on pressing social problems (Richardson 2006) and "the reproduction and production of power and abuse or domination" (Van Dijk 2001, p. 96). This links to a study of the farmland attacks as it is, to all accounts, a major social problem circumscribed by issues of power and abuse.

Finally, CDA's central preoccupation with power inequalities and social injustices is very consistent with the position of the researcher in a post-apartheid South Africa- seeking redress for past and still existing inequalities and being an advocate for democratic social change and egalitarian relations.

However, critics have argued that social action cannot be interpreted from text and talk without also observing media production and reception (Reynolds 2019, p. 50). I have considered this point and therefore also included Hall's theory of encoding and decoding to advance my analysis.

Reception theory: Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding

Hall's concepts of encoding/decoding messages were focused on analysing television discourses. Bodker, and others (2016) has reassessed Hall's Encoding/Decoding model to make it compatible with the analysis of mass media communication. In his study, "*Stuart Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model and the Circulation of Journalism in the Digital Landscape*" (Bødker 2016) Bødker demonstrates how the process of circulation on social media adds ideological meaning representative of "an additional dominant order, linked to the industrial structures of big commercial social media companies (e. g. Facebook and Google)" (p. 416) to original news content that circulates on those platforms. "However, the process of circulation and the modification of content it generates are usually imperceptible to the users" (Eslami et. al., 2015). This process is automated by frequently changing algorithms.

In light of Bodker's ideas, it appears necessary to reassess Hall's seminal Encoding/Decoding model (1973, p. 1980), in the context of social media and how receivers decode messages on social media.

Prior to reassessing the Encoding/Decoding model, it is however necessary to look at Hall's work to show how it radically transformed the approach to mass media communication. Prior to Hall's work, mass media communication was conceived of as being unidirectional and the audience was conceived of as being a collection of passive actors. However, these ideals were were criticised for their simplistic conceptualisation of the audience. Later models tended to reconceptualise the notion of audiences (Blumler & Katz 1974). These provided a better insight into audiences, especially into their motivations tied to their social backgrounds.

However, these developments in turn, "often privileged a very functional and individualistic approach, which consequently tended to fall short in predicting media effects" (Palmer 2020). Hall tried to overcome the limitations of the Encoding/Decoding model. Hall subsequently "affirmed that media messages reflect, through the use of a specific language code, the dominant social and economic order of society" (ibid). These dominant/hegemonic codes in turn influence (as in my study) the users of Facebook who engage with news. These meanings are nuanced because the users play an active role when decoding messages. This, Hall surmised, was because of the influence of social structures.

During the circulation process, meaning is generated in what Bødker called an "additional dominant order" (2016, p. 416) which echoes the cultural and commercial values of social media companies. Users are then no longer decoding a news commodity generated by a media producer for an imagined audience; but an "augmented commodity" (Bødker 2016, p.415) which has been selected for the audience at an individual level – through the algorithms coded on the basis of their selected and recorded preferences. Their preferences are defined by "an algorithm on the basis of the indications that users had given to them, either voluntarily when liking, or involuntarily when navigating on the platform, as every communication act is registered and stored by Facebook" (Jensen & Helles 2017). As a result, the decoding process

may also be affected by the circulation process on social media, as audiences are targeted on the basis of concrete information regarding their preferences and their online behaviour.

Hall considered communication a "passage of form" (1980, p. 128): from meaning to language on the producer's side; from language to meaning on the receiver's side. The message, at the centre of the communication process, is thus a "sign vehicle" (Hall 1980, p.129) which aims to transmit meaning between the producer and the sender through language. Hall uses the ideas of De Saussure (1916) pertaining to the sign, which is divided into the sign and its signifier. He concluded that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is a socially constructed convention; it may vary from one cultural perspective to another. The meaning of a message is thus neither transparent nor invariant.

Difference of interpretations may occur at the connotational level. Hall draws from the distinction made by Roland Barthes (2000 p. 24) between connotation and denotation. A signifier or sign vehicle carries two different types of codes:

(1) the codes of denotation – refers to recognisable objects which are literal and unambiguous.

(2) the codes of connotation – which add suggested meanings to the denoted signified. Codes of connotation can lead to different interpretations, through conveying a degree of ambiguity

"As the interpretation of language derives from social knowledge, which finds its origins in social practices, the interpretation of the connotations carried by a message can differ from one individual to another, according to their social knowledge" (Hall 1980, p. 131).
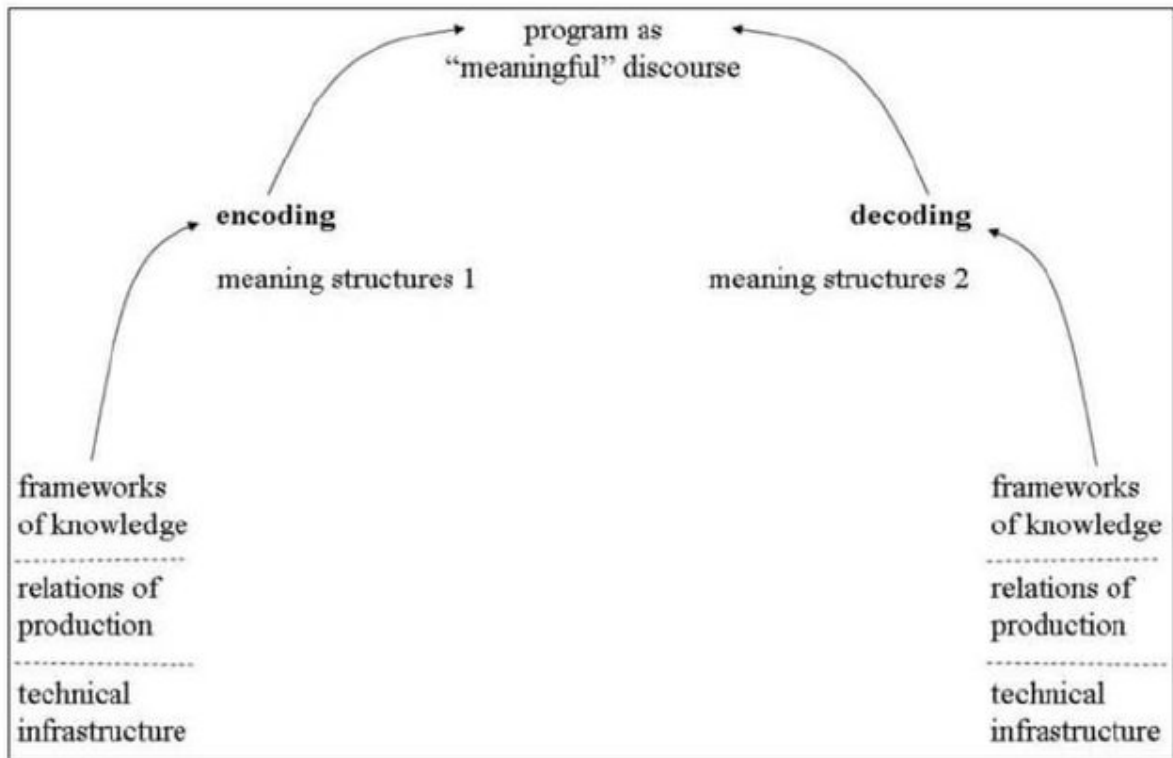
Figure 6: Hall's encoding/decoding model (Jones & Holmes 2011, p.26)

To encode a message the creator must place an idea or event in a format that will be meaningful to the audience. In the news industry, for example, there are standard practices that determine:

(1) what types of events qualify as news

(2) how news events are designed and structured for presentation to a mass audience. This is the first part of the interpretive work involved in a communication exchange.

> The second component is the reception of the message by the audience, which Hall calls the decoding process. Before any communication message can "'have an effect,' influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade," it must be "appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (Hall 1980, p. 130).
>
> The encoding process transforms experiences and ideas into meaningful discourse within existing social, economic, and cultural contexts. Audiences then interpret these messages within their own contexts. Decoding is therefore both a creative and a social practice; creative because

the message receiver brings his or her own cognitive and associative resources to bear on the deconstruction of a message and social because the receiver is also informed by larger-meaning structures such as language, community norms, and cultural conventions.

To sum up, encoding entails the creation of messages and the interpretation of these messages by the reader is referred to as decoding. "During the 'encoding'" moment, the sender 'constructs the message' through a 'code' to deliver the audience a preferred interpretation of the message and to induce an effect on the receiver" (Hall 1980, pp. 128-129). Hall referred to 'moments' of a circuit of the communication process:

Production

Circulation

Distribution/consumption

Reproduction.

Each of these 'moments' is necessary to the circuit as a whole but cannot fully guarantee the next 'moment' with which it is articulated (ibid).

The chosen code is influenced by the producer's "meaning structures" (Hall 1973, p. 4) which means that it is shaped by the social practices and the habitus conveyed by the media institutions. Encoded messages are received through a medium by the audience, who decode the message by extracting the meaning out of the message. The receiver also uses meaning structures, - a set of values in their social and cultural milieu. However, "the meaning structures used to decode do not necessarily correspond to those used by the producer for encoding" (Hall 1973, 1980).

The news sites "promote a dominant hegemonic order through their message, which reflects their values and views of the world" (Hall 1980, p. 134). Drawing from the Marxist perspective, he affirmed that media messages reflect the dominant social and economic order of society because this order is inscribed in the professional practices of journalism. Therefore, media are creating a dominant/hegemonic code which may inform the perception of the audience.

The receiver on the other hand, interprets this message on the basis of his social class, history, political power and economic status. Thus we get what Hall terms, "systemically distorted communication" (Hall 1980, p. 135), and three 'hypothetical' situations of communication are:

(1) the **"**dominant-hegemonic position" (ibid): when the producer's and the receiver's codes align, the receiver's interpretation can follow the 'preferred meaning', which corresponds to a dominant framework to interpret the world.

(2) a "negotiated code" (Hall 1980, p. 136): the receiver understands what the producer wants to say, accepts the dominant social order proposed by the producer on an abstract level but takes liberties when it comes to applying those codes to specific defined situations.

(3) an "oppositional code" (Hall 1980, p. 138): the receiver understands the meaning of a message but applies a completely different set of codes and interprets it with a completely different framework of references.

The possibility of using a 'negotiated' or an oppositional code opens up the possibility of a constant "struggle over the meaning" (Hall 1980, p. 133). This "struggle" aims to legitimise a preferred meaning of connotative signs within the limit of the dominant cultural order, which is a set of commonly accepted connotative codes (Hall 1973). However, meaning at a connotative level is fluid and rooted in cultural practices. Consequently, connotations are susceptible to changes, and those changes can be generated through "struggles over the meaning", which generate a permanent negotiation of the "dominant cultural order" (Hall 1980).

Understanding the concept of "augmented commodity"

In his article, Bødker (2016) concentrates on Hall's notion of circulation. The process is seen as combining technology and hermeneutics during which meaning travels in and out of a message form, and observes how this notion can be used to understand how meaning is added to original news content when circulating on the web. The original news commodity, as published by a media company, is modified through its reception in the world-wide web because it merges with interpretative participatory aspects such as visits, readings, likes,

comments, etc. These elements, which are added during the process of circulation, also carry meaning. Therefore, "what people access on the web or on social media is not the original news commodity, but an augmented commodity" (Bødker 2016, p. 415). This has been specifically selected for them - at the individual level - by the Facebook algorithm on the basis of their detected preferences. Users' preferences are identified by an algorithm on the basis of the indications-either, voluntarily when liking, or involuntarily when navigating on the platform, as every communication act is registered and stored by Facebook (Jensen & Helles 2017). Consequently, the decoding moment may be altered by the circulation process on social media as the audience is selected on the basis of their online behaviour.

Justification for using Hall's Encoding/Decoding model

As comments by Facebook users are considered to critique the construction of the social world around selected news item on farm attacks, Hall's encoding/decoding model is insightful in providing a heuristic for analysis.

The limitations of the Encoding/Decoding model

While Hall gave a very clear description of the power relationships at stake within the process of mass communication, some limits to his conclusions regarding decoding were pointed out by subsequent scholarship. Firstly, his definition of decoding has been criticised for its oversimplification. Morley (2003) suggests that the moment of decoding hides a much more complex process than Hall (1980) imagines.

Hall defines decoding

> "as an undivided action of reading to extract meaning, but decoding may instead encompass a number of processes, ranging from paying attention, identifying the message as relevant, understanding the message, interpreting it, and occasionally generating an answer" (Morley 2003).

This framework assumes that the latent meaning of the text is encoded in the dominant code. Some critics have raised the question of how a 'preferred reading' can be established. Shaun Moores asks "Where is it and how do we know if we've found it? Can we be sure we didn't put

it there ourselves while we were looking? And can it be found by examining any sort of text?" (Moores 1993, p. 28). John Corner (1983) argues that, to find actual examples of media texts in which one reading is preferred within a plurality of possible readings, is not an easy task. As Justin Wren-Lewis comments, "the fact that many decoders will come up with the same reading does not make that meaning an essential part of the text. Kathy Myers notes, in the spirit of a post-structuralist social semiotics, that it can be misleading to search for the determinations of a preferred reading solely within the form and structure' of the text" (Chandler 2007, p. 157). Just as a reductive reading of Hall's model could lead to the reification of a medium or genre, it could also encourage the essentialising of readers (e.g. as 'the resistant reader') whereas reading positions are 'multiform, fissured, schizophrenic, unevenly developed, culturally, discursively and politically discontinuous, forming part of a shifting realm of ramifying differences and contradictions' (Stam 2000, p. 233). Finally, in relation to the data used in this study, Shaw (2017) points out that the act of reception in encoding/decoding does not adequately capture the interactivity of new media texts.

Summary

This chapter has outlined the two theoretical positions that will be used to analyse the news on Facebook on its IOL and BBC sites. CDA will provide both micro and macro analysis. To achieve theoretical triangulation, Hall's encoding/decoding model will be used to interpret user's comments on Facebook and the wider discourse around the farmland attacks, suggesting in essence that the meaning of a text is not inherent within the text itself, but is created within the relationship between text and reader.

CHAPTER FOUR

Methodology

Introduction

The methodology of a dissertation describes the plan of the study, the type of data collected and the procedures for collecting them. The selection of a methodological framework adds to the strength of research design. This chapter provides a solid foundation for selecting a particular method and allows connections to be made between the aim of the research, the choice of methods, and the approach to data analysis (Padgett 2017).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to analyse selected news articles from IOL and BBC News pertaining to the farm attacks between 2017-2018 through critical discourse analysis and Hall's model of encoding/decoding.

Rationale for the methods chosen

As discussed in Chapter 3, CDA has been shown to be appropriate because it is a systematic study of language as a means of social construction and Hall's encoding/decoding model is appropriate as it is a useful tool to critique the reception of the selected news corpus on Facebook. This study uses a qualitative case study design and is designed to be rich and explanatory in nature. Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honours an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The study is situated in a critical paradigm that enables the researcher to practice 'deep democracy' which involves identifying and transforming socially unjust social structures, policies, beliefs and practices. Its primary purpose is to identify, contest and help resolve 'gross power imbalances' in society that contribute to systemic inequalities and injustices (Taylor & Medina 2013).

The chosen method for this research design is a case study which Yin (1994) defines as a method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context. The choice of a case study in this instance is motivated by the fact that a case study is particularly suited to investigate a contemporary phenomenon, in this case, the farmland attacks. Importantly, a case study provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles (Cohen & Manion 2011, p.289). This lends itself to analysing real life phenomena in the form of Facebook comments responding to the corpus under study. A case study is also suitable to understand cause and effect. Once again, it is appropriate as I intend to investigate why users on Facebook respond the way they do to the corpus. Finally, contexts are unique and dynamic, hence case studies investigate and report the real- life, complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships, and other factors in a unique instance (ibid).

Moreover, I chose this design because its characteristics (as enumerated above) enable an insightful study of inequalities in society, gross power imbalances and it aims to transform socially unjust beliefs, practices and relations.

Research sample and data source

The sample for this research is six purposefully selected news items on Facebook and their Facebook comments. This was drawn from a wider corpus of two hundred articles that I intensively perused over and over again. Three articles each were finally chosen from IOL and BBC News pertaining to the farmland attacks between 2017-2018. The choice of these articles was motivated by my understanding that they best exemplified my research questions and aligned with my theoretical tools. The IOL news covered a local perspective whilst BBC News presented an international perspective. I hypothesised that this choice would give me a

comparative perspective. I also selected articles that covered key events in reporting in the farmland attacks in these years. Finally, users' subjective comments on this corpus were   also harvested from Facebook using the same process of selection.

Data Collection Methods

Data collection was through non-probability sampling. An unobtrusive netnographic approach was used in which I pursued an in-depth exploratory approach to data collection. I began by identifying mainstream news sources, alternative media, and self-representational spaces in which the discourse on farmland attacks was located. I did a content specific search on Google using the Google News platform in addition to searching on Facebook. After identifying research questions and relevant media, I began with what Carvalho (2008 p.166) calls an "open-ended reading" to "help identify significant debates, controversies, and silences, and possibly to suggest specifications and amendments to initial research goals and questions" (p.166).

After reading broadly on my research topic, I "characterised relevant genres" and "choose typical texts" (in line with Wodak's advice (2010, p. 25) for my analysis, discarding media that do not exemplify my research problem. I also ensured that news items selected were information-rich and representative of the wider corpus on farm attacks.

I then decided that I will use the news platforms of IOL and BBC News on Facebook as raw data and purposefully harvested articles and comments according to pe-selected criteria- that is, they all had to be information rich and deal with the farmland attacks between 2017- 2018. These years were selected because the topic of the farmland attacks was trending on social media at that time. Especially important to this selection was that these years saw farm attacks garner more local and international attention and this was characterised by events that captured the interest of South Africans both in their brutality and the subsequent polarisation these events effected.   Each document was given a document identification number (DIN) for ease of reference.

I choose these news sites because they were accessible, provided relevant information that could be explored with my research questions and they provided local and international perspectives. I stored all this data on my laptop and backed them up on a flash drive. I also meticulously collected the subjective comments of users of the corpus for analysis and reflection. My aim was to achieve a detailed understanding of the differing positions so as to be able to situate the data in the broader spectrum of Hall's encoding/decoding categories. I shared all these articles with my peers on campus and they agreed with my choices. I finally reduced my corpus of data to six articles that I thought would be good to analyse in terms of my research problem and to describe "critical discourse moments" (Carvalho 2008; Richardson 2006, that would prove useful for an analysis using Hall's encoding/decoding constructs. I was guided by Hewitson's observation in selecting the size of the corpus: "the more depth required, the smaller the sample can be" (2014, p.266). This was in sync with a detailed examination of lexical items, iconography and word classes typical to critical discourse analyses and which also permitted a study using Hall's encoding/decoding of the ensuing Facebook comments. I also highlighted any sentences and comments that I thought would be particularly useful in answering my research questions. In addition, I often returned to my research questions and modified them until I was satisfied that the corpus collected could answer my research questions.

Data Analysis Methods

I used CDA as exemplified by Fairclough (2005), Wodak (2005) and Van Dijk (2013). This was supplemented by Machin & Mayr's (2012) seminal text, *How to do Critical Discourse Analysis* and Richardson's, *Analysing Newspapers: An approach from critical discourse analysis* (2007).

General Analytical Framework for CDA: processes and procedure

Stages of Analysis:

1. Select a discourse related to injustice or inequality in society**;**

2. Locate and prepare data sources;

3. Explore the background of each text. Examine the social and historical context and producers of the texts.

Characteristics of the genre, historical context, production process, overall slant or style, intended audience, intended purpose of the text, publisher characteristics, and writer characteristics.

Microanalysis – lexical choice, iconography. Examine the language for indications of the aims of the texts;

4. Code texts and identify overarching themes;

5. Analyse the external relations in the texts (interdiscursivity)

Examine social relations that control the production of the text; in addition, examine the reciprocal relations (how the texts affect social practices and structures). How do social practices inform the arguments in the text? How does the text in turn influence social practices? Interpret the data

Revisit the structural features and individual fragments, placing them into the broader context and themes established in the earlier stages.

Hall's Encoding and Decoding Model

For the encoding/decoding analysis I gained intimate familiarity with the article contents by reading and rereading the corpus and began to notice significant details as well as to make new insights about their meanings. First I began with precoding- sorting the articles and comments into Hall's three categories:

1. The dominant-hegemonic position;
2. The negotiated position; and
3. The oppositional position.

I then categorised key words and phrases into codes. These codes function as a way of patterning and classifying.

> A code in qualitative data analysis is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-

based or visual data. The portion of data to be coded can range in magnitude from a single word to a full sentence to an entire page of text to a stream of moving images (Saldaña 2021, p. 3).

Later I reorganised these into emergent categories for further analysis. I always kept the big picture in mind and was mindful of how the documents interrelate.- I kept asking myself what were the connections within, between, and among the corpus? This approach was derived from Leavy (2014) who showed that ABC.

My Position

As an Indian South African female, I naturally bring a certain perspective to my study of the farmland attacks. These views stem from my life experiences and stories of dispossession and displacement that my father often recounts from his childhood. My father, like so many black South Africans had to relocate to Chatsworth (a designated Indian area by the apartheid regime) and forego the deep attachment he enjoyed with his Indian and coloured friends. I recollect his lament that people were saying that "the houses in Chatsworth were like tiny mushrooms and you could spit into your neighbour's yard from your window". I keenly felt my father's shame and sense of injustice. These are the biases I bring to my study and that inform a hypothesis that social and economic oppression must be eliminated, by peace if it can be, by force if it cannot. Before engaging with this study of the farmland attacks, I understood the history of dispossession and subsequent impoverishment of black South Africans. I remember my history teacher quoting Verwoerd (the architect of apartheid) saying that blacks should be "drawers of water and hewers of wood" and constitute a servant class. In a sense I understood why so many black people were struggling and mired in poverty. I rebelled against this pejorative stereotyping and I bring these life experiences to my study.

In approaching this study, I expected to find policies and an economic structure skewed completely in favour of whites. I also expected to find resistance and racial animosity and acts of cruelty. To minimise my strong views, I often reflected upon Nelson Mandela's idea of the 'rainbow nation'- that we can all live together in peace and harmony and without racial oppression in a real democracy- this gave me a forward looking and solution-orientated perspective to my research that counteracted my bias. I also found succour in my religious beliefs that forbid prejudice and that advocate peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Indeed,

the first verse of the Holy Quran begins: "In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate" (1, 1). It demonstrates the great importance Islam attaches to such values as mercy, compassion and peaceful co-existence and shapes my worldview.

Reliability and Validity

According to Lincoln & Guba, trustworthiness is achieved by credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research (1985, p. 679).

Credibility refers to the confidence that can be placed on the truth of the research findings. Credibility establishes whether or not the research findings represent plausible information drawn from the participants' original data and is a correct interpretation of that data. Strategies to ensure credibility are prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation and member check (Korstjens & Moser 2018, p.120). Of these the aspects that pertain to my study are:

Prolonged engagement: I have researched the farm attacks over a period of two years, investing a great deal of time immersed in the data, methodologies and readings. By this process, I was able to select information-rich data and discard the data that was inappropriate . I also spent considerable time getting to know the context and controversies around the farm attacks by intensive reading and reflection. I studied the raw data until the two theories were applied to critique the corpus.

Persistent observation: I read and reread the corpus of data, isolating lexical units for analysis and coding the data using Hall's categories with precoding, coding and sematic analysis of the linguistic codes.

Triangulation: Triangulation involves the application of several research methods in the study of the same phenomenon with the hope of overcoming weaknesses and biases of a single method of study. Triangulation serves to obtain confirmation of findings through convergence of results of different methods. My study achieves theoretical triangulation as I used two theories to interrogate the same corpus i.e., CDA or Critical Discourse Analysis as discussed

in previous chapters and Hall's encoding/decoding model. Additionally, I used two data sources in the form of online news postings and related Facebook comments that they elicited.

Dependability and confirmability: These were achieved by keeping an accurate and detailed audit trial of the research. I also took care to establish that the conclusions were derived from the data and not from my preconceptions and faulty reasoning.

Reflexivity: I engaged in self-reflection by acknowledging my bias (documented above) and preferences. I reflected upon my values and tried to see things from the perspectives of the victims as well as from those of the perpetrators of the farm attacks, though this was not easy to do.

Summary

This chapter detailed the methodology used, reflected upon my position and engaged with issues of reliability and validity in qualitative research as advocated by Lincoln & Guba (1985).

CHAPTER FIVE

Data Analysis

Introduction

Data analysis is the central step in qualitative research. Whatever the data are, it is their analysis that, in a decisive way, provides the outcomes of the research. Flick (2014) asserts that qualitative data analysis:

> is the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it. Meaning-making can refer to subjective or social meanings. Often, qualitative data analysis combines approaches of a rough analysis of the material (overviews, condensation, summaries) with approaches of a detailed analysis (elaboration of categories, hermeneutic interpretations or identified structures). The final aim is often to arrive at generalizable statements by comparing various materials or various texts or several cases (2014, p.5)

This chapter analyses data in the form of selected articles on Facebook from IOL and BBC News in conjunction with their Facebook comments.

The first article (DIN 1) is entitled,*#Black Monday: BLF slams 'racist' farm murder protest* from IOL, October 31, 2017.

The article was a rebuttal of the Black Monday protest initiated by an advocacy farmer group, 'Genoeg is Genoeg' to protest the attacks on farmers in South Africa. The march was condemned by Black First, Land First (BLF), a black consciousness, Pan African revolutionary movement in South Africa who want land appropriation without compensation.

Figure 7: Black Monday protests against farm attacks. #Black Monday, 2017

An analysis of the iconography (a photograph of the white protestors headlines the article) shows a cross on a white placard and one member holding a huge South African flag. This is suggestive of their strong Christian faith and projected patriotism to democratic South Africa. The overt symbolism requires interrogation however, as other online news forums report the march (*Huffington Post* 17 October 2017) showing other farmers displaying the old South African flag which is associated with racism and white privilege. This leads to conjecture as to why this particular flag (with decidedly more political capital) was chosen for the shot. The old South African flag would no doubt receive a hostile reception, little sympathy for apartheid nostalgia and reify white farmers as racist enemies of the democratic state.

This group (Genoeg is Genoeg) enjoys support from white farmers and sympathisers locally and supremist groups abroad. On the other hand, BLF, claim to represent black aspirations and 'economic freedom' though in fact they were deregistered as a political party in 2020. Van Dijk's (2013) ideological squaring is useful in analyzing the polarized ideological divide between both groups. This is manifest in the adjective "racist" in the headline which both parties accuse each other of. Additionally, BLF reference the farmers in a series of invectives:

"racist, violent land thieves"- which ironically could also apply to them, depending on which ideological view one takes.

The verb, "slams'' after the adjectival clause, "Black Monday" is suggestive of the vehement emotions the protest has generated among BLF members. BLF (the subjects of the article) are an extremist left party and enjoy fringe support. Their radical politics elicits frequent mention in the press, but this belies their actual support. The controversy in this article is reflective of a wider societal problem in which blacks own just 4 per cent of the land after more than 20 years of democracy (Mahr 2018). The article foregrounds the polarised, racial divide in South African society.

The Facebook responses are instructive. Singer and former 'Idols SA' winner Heinz Winckler was critical of the march. In a live video on his Facebook page, Winckler maintained that it was unreasonable of the protesters to try to get the attention of the international community:

> "They have their own problems, they are under terror attacks, they have got Isis, they have got immigrants and they have all sorts of issues they are dealing with" (Winckler 2017).

He went on to say wearing black was not going to solve the problem of farm murders, adding that he believed that there were deeper-rooted issues that needed to be addressed:

> Something has to change, that is true, but... is it going to help to wear black on a Monday? Respectfully, I don't think so... we are not going to solve farm murders as a specific problem if we don't look at... the real cause... of the problem; it is not a race thing, but we are making it a race thing... that is not the way we are going to get a better nation. We sit with an unbelievably unhealthy, dysfunctional social society, where we have... millions of people that grew up in a way that did not teach them what the average Afrikaans, white person was taught when they grew up (ibid).

Hundreds of users angrily commented that he should stick to music, while one even commented:

"He shouldn't even stick to music because he sounds like a walrus who is being raped when he opens his big mouth" (Name withheld, 2017).

Another commented:

"Trust me. This video will kill your career. You did not think this through. The general Afrikaans people you are talking about are the ones supporting your career. It stops today" (Name withheld 2, 2017).

This comment also signals how capital shapes production as well as consumption, particularly in the light that Winckler subsequently walked back his comments and apologised.

The second article from IOL, (DIN 2), is entitled, *Hofmeyr: Government not doing enough to protect citizens* (Hofmeyer: Government not doing enough, 2017). The power and social influence of this article is accentuated by the use of celebrity actor and singer, Steve Hofmeyr in the headline. The article embodied customary representations of victimhood in the lexical choices of "rape, robbery and murder" of white farmers. The text reports on AfriForum picketing and handing over a petition signed by over 175 000 people at the Union Buildings protesting the attacks on white farmers. The Union Buildings is symbolic in that it is the official seat of the South African Government and also houses the offices of the President of South Africa. It is an iconic landmark and the centre of political life in South Africa. It also has a dual historical symbolism more aligned with the world view of AfriForum. It was originally built to signify the unity among the Boer Republics, the Orange Free State, the Cape, Transvaal and Natal colonies.

The article uses the rhetorical tropes of card stacking, plain folks and emotional stereotypes to exemplify its thesis. Card Stacking is the selective use of facts to tell only one side of the story, often obscuring the other side (Mutsvairo 2016, p.325). In this article, "statistics of farm attacks", "common times for farm attacks" and the mention of "farmers killed in the most brutal way" foreground a cumulative view that favours farmers to the exclusion of contesting facts such as farmer cruelty inflicted upon labourers, low, subsistence wages and a legacy of colonial and apartheid land ownership skewed grossly in favour of whites. Plain folks rhetoric is transferring the aura of authority and prestige of a celebrity or opinion leader to a product, person or idea in order to persuade the public to accept or reject it (ibid). This may be discerned

in the use of celebrity and singer, Steve Hofmeyr to deliver AfriForum's message. Emotional stereotype is the evocation of an emotional image such as (in this article) the shocking, persistent and senseless murder of farmers (ibid).

Calling Afriforum a "civil rights" movement is a misnomer as it focuses exclusive on white farmers' interests and excludes the majority of South Africans.

From a class perspective, this report bolsters the power of the wealthy class - a hierarchy of capitalism in which the rich are valued more than the poor. Class exploitation is ignored, and exploitative relations are glossed over and naturalised as normative social reality (Richardson 2006, p. 134).

Hofmeyr's (2013) comments, although predating this article, provide an inkling as to his extreme political persuasions:

> In layman's terms: my tribe is dying like flies. We are dyeing at a rate completely unknown to us and this in a time of peace. But even in time of war we did not die like this…we cannot celebrate Black Consciousness, The Struggle, Steve Biko, the ANC, Youth Day or Nelson Mandela when our little girls are raped as we speak and a white farmer is slaughtered every five days (2013).

Hofmeyr was heavily criticised after performing the former South African national anthem, *Die Stem*, at a cultural festival known as *Innibos* in Nelspruit in July 2014. He went on to perform the anthem on international tours, and encouraged white South Africans to continue singing it, stating that it did not contain any form of hate speech. Hofmeyr also posted a picture of a World Cup soccer stadium which he claimed could be filled by the number of whites murdered by blacks. Africa Check, a fact-checking organisation, has found Hofmeyr's claims to be "incorrect and grossly exaggerated" - pointing out that whites are in fact "less likely to be murdered than any other race group" (IOL 2014, *Hofmeyr sings Die Stem at Innibos*). Of importance to note is the hysteria of tone, the message and the deliberate exaggeration/ misinformation. One should consider what the purpose of all of this could be?

The following comments on Facebook are a purposefully selected sample of likeminded responses to the article (D2):

> Its really shocking what is happening in South African and the world keeps quiet, God Bless all of you, I am reposting this and will keep on doing so! (Name withheld 3, 2017)
>
> And there is already tens of thousands murdered!!That is genocide!(Name withheld 4, 2017)
>
> So now the good religious farmers bring food until he gets murdered?(Name withheld 5, 2017)
>
> No Farmers... No Food !!(Name withheld 6, 2017).

The first two comments are couched in hyperbole and fear mongering. Not only are the murder and genocide claims grossly over-stated, the additional salutation of "God Bless all of you" (ibid) appropriate moral and spiritual capital against evil. The stereotype of the "good religious farmer" is also propaganda to promote congenial self-images and to advance notions of unjust persecution.

The comment, "no farmer….no food" is also an unwarranted inferential leap. Most of the labour is produced by cheap African labour in exploitative relations and this group is totally absent in this gloss.

The third IOL article (DIN 3) is headlined, *Farm attacks, social justice and our food security* (Ebrahims 2018). The reader is orientated into believing that this matter is of grave importance and warrants attention. This is firstly reified by the headlining photograph with the use of salience (i.e. where certain features are made to stand out in a picture)- In this case the reduced focus is on the evocation: stop killing our farmers!

Figure 8: A bumper sign during a blockade of the freeway between Johannesburg and Vereeniging in protest against the murder of farmers, (Ebrahims 2018).

The use of the possessive pronoun "our" signals a personal connection and is simultaneously attention grabbing and distance reducing, creating the impression that this is everyone's problem. Linking the collocations, "social justice" and "farm attacks", encourages the readers to formulate links in ways which they might not otherwise conceive of. So, in this instance, the "farm attacks" demands "social injustice" with all the uncritical inferences that it presupposes. Actually, it is ironic because the farm labourers were deprived of the same "social justice" for decades by super exploitative and often cruel master- servant relations. An issue this article is silent about.

The conversational style is a mix of formal and informal lexical choices. The informal lexical choices are as follows: "Even so", "but its also true that", "it is shocking", "the sad part is that", " that is why", "smacked of racism", "we cannot run away from the fact" (ibid). The notable formal lexical choices are: "and in many cases convictions have not been secured", "there is no evidence to suggest that", "to address this phenomenon with the same political grit" (ibid). Additionally, the mentioning of statistics lends scientific credibility and an air of objectivity to the authors claims. On the other hand, the use of informal lexical choices brings a sense of informality to the discourse. It is also suggestive of dialogue between equals (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 44). Fairclough explains that the mixing of these two lexicons infuse official discourses with a populist voice (1995). He also describes this process as "simulated equalisation" – whereby the author appears on an equal footing with the reader through the choices of expressions readers may make themselves" (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 46).

A note of pathos also foregrounds the plight of farmers. This is manifest in the fact that they are: "made to drink boiling water", "have been tied up and burnt with iron rods", and "frequently elderly women have been raped" (Ebrahims 2018). These phrases of explicit abuse are attempts to secure an emotional connection with readers so that they may align with the author's positionality by arousing their sympathy and abhorrence of sadistic crime. Readers are also coerced into supporting the plight of the farmers by the author referencing the patriotic memory of Nelson Mandela (antonomasia: the substitution of an epithet or title for a proper name), "That is especially true if we are adherents to Madiba's stance that South Africa belongs to all who live in it" (ibid).

Another subtlety needs exposure here. Mandela being hailed by his clan's name, "Madiba" has great persuasive force particularly as he is unequivocally perceived as the father of the nation. This honorific name is juxtaposed with a common-sense democratic truth -"South Africa belongs to all who live in it". The effect of this is to covertly establish a deliberate gloss in favour of the author's stance. The article ignores widely known instances of farmer cruelty and glosses over the virtual white monopoly of arable land. More tellingly, the black labourer and small farm holder/renter is entirely absent from the lexicon. Together with this suppression of facts we find expressions of moral outrage: "South Africans were in shock", "frankly indefensible", "the sad part is that", "ignored repeated pleas", "we must equally condemn" (ibid).

In conclusion, it can be ascertained that under the guise of condemning Dutton's racist comments, another agenda is inserted into the conversation- a sub text in support of the plight of farmers and the need for the state to declare the killing of farmers a priority crime. This is further advanced by assertive verbs such as "condemn" (which is repeated), "repeated pleas" and "declare" that also serve to motivate the moneyed class interest of the news portal.

The following Facebook comments were selected for analysis. These comments were chosen because they are representative of the controversy and polarised views this article generated. The first comment (DIN F) is representative of the condemnation Australian Foreign Minister, Dutton received in response to his offer for immigration to white farmers from South Africa:

> The hilarious reality of Dutton's "brainfart" - is that the South African government has (for 8
>
> years) been trying to induce farmers to sell to black farmers.

> This is to redress the inequality of 10% population owning 70% of farms. This imbalance is a continuation of apartheid

> But the farmers won't sell. In the meantime, the black population gets frustrated, and violence breaks out .So the government ups the pressure - by threatening forced resumption - still the farmers won't sell.

> So what in heavens name does Dutton think - that the farmers (on hearing his brave offer) will jump on the first plane, leaving their money behind (Name withheld 7, 2018).

This is an ad hominem response. Dutton is mocked as "hilarious" and dubbed a "brainfart". Importantly, the author signals the growing frustration of whites monopolising farmland and still maintaining the apartheid status quo of land ownership. The comment is framed in the interrogative mode, questioning Dutton's thinking that the farmers "would jump on the first plane, leaving their money behind". The dependant clause at the end alludes to the profitability of farming and underlines an economic motive for farmers clinging onto disproportionate swathes of land. This post elicited accusations of Marxism, to which the following counter argument was raised:

> Oooohhh, big bad Marxism. You obviously don't even know what Marx did/wrote/thought

> Actually, its the recalcitrant white farmers who won't sell their land, despite fair offers from the govt and black farmers - eventually, the black majority will own the land - by legal non-violent means, or through violence.

> They have a choice. The only choice they don't have, is continuation of land apartheid and extraordinary inequality (Name withheld 8, 2018).

These comments are extraordinary (in the context of reporting on this site) in that here the farmers are held culpable for exploitation. This goes against the mainstream diatribe (particularly in the Afrikaans press) of white farmer victimhood in which the suffering and marginalisation of black labourers are elided. The subversive rhetoric seemingly critiques stereotypical thinking as in "big, bad Marxism" and is distinctly ad hominem as in, "You obviously don't even know what Marx did/wrote/thought." The lexical choice of adjectives:

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describing the white farmers as "recalcitrant" and the offer made by black farmers and government as "fair" betray the positionality and ideological orientation of the author. This is further reified by a high degree of modality in the final sentence: The only choice they don't have, is continuation of land apartheid and extraordinary inequality (Name withheld 9, 2018).

An opposing viewpoint is presented in the following comment:

> Less than three weeks ago, the South African Parliament passed a motion, by 241 votes to 83, to start the process to amend the Constitution to allow compensation of farms without compensation.

> The mover of the motion, Julius Malema is on the record saying in 2016 he was " not calling for the slaughter of white people, at least for now...". If this had been said by Duterte or a Balkans leader about Muslim minorities, the outrage would have been worldwide and condemnation, including calls for UN sanctions would have been swift. Why the silence?

> Zimbabwe went down this path decades ago and it bankrupted their country and entrenched a radical despot. They went from a prosperous well-fed nation that exported food to a mendicant state with people starving. I have been there to see it (Name withheld 10, 2018).

Malema's (2019) firebrand rhetoric is contextualised and selectively quoted. This "genocidal" statement is somewhat neutered when viewed in its entirety:

> "We are not calling for the slaughtering of white people. At least for now. What we are calling for is the peaceful occupation of land and we don't owe anyone an apology for that" (Malema's not slaughtering white people, 2019).

The author then compares South African attempts at equitable land distribution to the failed, chaotic and violent occupation of land in in Zimbabwe. In doing so, he is on a slippery slope as this i actually is an expression of covert racism, that is, blacks are destined for failure and unable to do anything properly. This perception is overtly supported by a similar response.

indicative of a more generalised racism: "Going by the Zimbabwe example, they'll get starvation with their 'equality'. So what if whites own 70% of the farmland, they manage better" (Name withheld 11, 2018).

The first BBC News article (DIN 4) reports on the sentencing of two white men who forced a black man into a coffin, threatening to burn him alive after assaulting him. This text is a signifier of change in that white men are being prosecuted by a black judge for an assault upon a black man. This could not have happened under apartheid. It also disrupts the stereotypical representations of black laborers assaulting white farmers.

However, the fact that the victim, Mr Mlotshwa only reported the matter after footage of the assault emerged on YouTube months later underlines his paucity of social capital and access to resources in contrast to his white perpetrators, who immediately announced their intention to appeal the verdict.

The case had caused outrage in South Africa and drew attention to the racial tensions that persist in the country. The headline is significant in that it draws attention to the race of the perpetrators. Normally, in the commission of a crime race would not form part of an attention-grabbing headline: "South Africa coffin case: White farmers receive jail terms" (South Africa coffin case, 2017).

This was exacerbated by the fact that the perpetrators, Theo Martins Jackson and Willem Oosthuizen showed no remorse before "a visibly angered judge" (ibid). This racial polarisation also figures in the choice of lexicon: "fraught with emotion", "visibly angered", "outraged" and "wept" (ibid). A direct quote from the judge, "both men are aged 29 and 30 and would have spent most of their lives in democratic South Africa" (ibid) also signifies that racism is still very pervasive in South Africa today. Additionally, the use of the direct quote also amplifies the incredulity and disbelief readers experienced at seeing a photograph of Victor Mlotshwa incarcerated in the coffin. Direct quotes are strong ideological tools that guide reader's interpretation (Eissa 2014). Hence Sky News reporting on the incident with Mlotshwa begging the pair, "please don't kill me" (Allegretti 2017) relives the drama and the reality of a commission of a serious crime.

This racial divide is further manifest in the jubilation expressed at the long sentences handed down to the perpetrators by black attendees at the courtroom and the dismay of many whites who:

> feel the sentences were too harsh and that the courts have become politicised, with relatively rare cases like this one getting all the attention, while - away from the spotlight - white farmers are routinely robbed and murdered (ibid).

It is clear that these comments arise out of a desire for white farmers to maintain relations of power and domination, diverting attention away from the exploitative relations with black labourers by cries of "white genocide".

Figure 9: Governing ANC supporters backing Victor Mlotshwa. (BBC News South Africa coffin case)

Victor Mlotshwa can be seen after the court case smiling and raising his fist in a black consciousness salute along with many supporters from the African National Congress. He is mobbed by faces of jubilation as a hand of comfort and solidarity in a yellow ANC T-shirt rests reassuringly upon his shoulder. The writer's stance can be determined by his positive attribution of "South Africa coming of age" (ibid). This figurative language is equally a testimony of black emancipation as it is a condescending colonial barb at a former colony and says much about the ideological orientation of the news portal and its colonial hangover.

The Facebook comments, predictably, were a volley of indignation at this racist crime. They ranged from:

stupid idiots torturing citizens in their country, can u immagine! they deserve life imprisonment" (Name withheld 12, 2017), as well as: "Pigs, good for nothing idiots...(Name withheld 13, 2017).

and:

They should spend the rest of their miserable life's in jail. The whites mistreated us during colonial rule, they still want to do more. Yet they are in our land Africa. i hate some of those fools who think they are always better than Africans (Name withheld 14, 2017).

These comments are indicative of acute frustration at a long history of discrimination and colonial stock serotypes of inferiority that still persists today. The following comment questions this colonial legacy: "How could you torture someone who is at home? and you are a wonderer[wanderer]" (Name withheld 15, 2017).

This comment inverts the logic of what happened by the use of irony. Whites are in fact trespassing on African land and not the other way round- as alleged by the perpetrators. These comments were countenanced by support for the perpetrators:

The appeal of the so-called coffin case two, Willem Oosthuizen and Theo Jackson, was successful in the Appeals Court in Bloemfontein and their sentences were reduced to effectively 5 years, down from 11 and 14 years respectively. They were arrested after putting a suspected copper thief in a coffin to scare him (Name withheld 15, 2017).

This interpretation of events trivializes the incident and alleges that Mlotshwa was intent on stealing rather than trespassing as he claims, feeding into a stereotype that all blacks are thieves. The crime is euphemistically described as a "scare" tactic notwithstanding the fact that the only available witness was also assaulted and the coffin which was to serve as evidence was burnt. The incident is further generalised in racist terms: "South Africa's number one priority is protecting black criminals" (Name withheld 17, 2017).

Of interest to whom and why? is the shifting relations of power in these discourses. Power that was once dominant is now openly subverted by black voices. We see a distribution of power

in these social fields that deepens democracy in its challenge to oppression. These texts are now sites of social struggle. The reader needs to have clarity of signaling and argument indicated in a clear and explicit manner.

The focus of the BBC News article (DIN 5) is to fact check the conservative rally for acceptance and support of the idea of "white genocide" in South Africa's farmlands. The author's stance is evident in the title in which the lexical choice of the gerund, "playing" invites suggestions of manipulation:

South Africa: The groups playing on the fears of a 'white genocide' (Choatia 2018).

The inverted commas around "white genocide" also suggest that there is no consensus about this phenomenon and that it subject to question.

Figure 10: BBC News White South Africans protesting at home and abroad (Choatia, 2018)

The headline photograph shows middle aged white protestors carrying huge white crosses to which red balloons are attached. Some protestors are carrying signs that make an imperative appeal, "stop the genocide please". The white crosses and the red balloons signify the murder of white farmers. White could also signify race and innocence in this context. The eye-catching red balloons add an additional layer of salience to the crosses and signify the spilt blood of

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white farmers. This alarmist representation is consistent with the agenda of groups like Afriforum and its proponents to elevate farm attacks to a priority crime in South Africa.

The article uses the quotes of social actors to elucidate a claim of injustice and "white genocide" (ibid) and then uses the voice of authority and statistical evidence to refute their veracity. British columnist, Katie Hopkins is introduced as "controversial" (ibid)- signaling that her views may be questionable and invite scrutiny. Her tweet, reproduced in the article claims: "The violent, ethnic cleansing of white farmers by armed black gangs is infuriating & heart-breaking. And the world doesn't care. Or at least the mainstream media doesn't care. Do you?" (ibid).

Hopkin's use of epiplexis (an attempt to shame an opponent into adopting a particular point of view) is given salience by the bold font by which she is introduced. This is designed to be attention grabbing and excite the curiosity of the reader. Her lament of 'ethnic cleansing" and "whites being slaughtered in South Africa" is couched in hyperbolic, stereotypical and apocalyptic racist valuations. The trustworthiness of these claims are subsequently refuted by the author.

Her comments contextualise the growing influence of Afrikaner groups in the paragraph that follows, using a series of relative clauses such as "targeted and killed", "discriminated against", "being sidelined" (ibid) - an accretion of negative sentiment to conjure an impression of race-based genocide is developed. The article goes on to mention social actors such as President Trump and Secretary of State, Pompeo, using apposition to illustrate their authority and enhance their claims of support. Trump's premise of "South Africa land and farm seizures and expropriations and the large scale killing of farmers" (ibid) is subsequently refuted by the author by a fact check of statistical evidence:

> "Between April 2016 and March 2017, 74 people - of all races - were murdered on farms in South Africa, according to police figures, compared to more than 19,000 murders nationwide in the same period" (ibid).

> "The BBC has found that there is **no reliable data** to suggest farmers are at greater risk of being murdered than the average South African" (ibid).

The bold font lends added emphasis to the untenable claims made by Hopkins and Trump. This is further reinforced by an embedded video- "What was apartheid? A 90 second look back at decades of injustice". In addition, an authoritative and expert voice, political analysts, Somadoda Fikeni refutes the claims of white conservatives and lends credence to the author's view:

> "They [Afriforum] are gripped in a siege mentality. They can't see a world where their privilege is challenged. They disregard history" (ibid).

The conservative white claim is further undermined by the assertion that: "More than 24 years after the end of apartheid, white people enjoy average standards of living far higher than black South Africans" (ibid).

The alarmist views of Afriforum is widely propagated by its key advocates, Kallie Kriel and Ernest Roets, in their tour to the United States, signifying, in essence, a slippery slope without warrant (and refuted by British Prime Minister Theresa May):

> "A crisis can be averted if there is international pressure. If you turn a blind eye, it can bring us to the position of Zimbabwe. We don't want the country to be destroyed" (ibid).

This BBC News article (DIN 6), "South Africa 'sunflower murder' farmers jailed" reports on the case of two white farmers who were accused of murdering a teenage African boy whom they allegedly apprehended stealing sunflowers. The headline foregrounds the trivial pretense for the murder (stealing a few sunflowers) and is calculated to elicit shock and outrage such representation would create. This sensationalism behind this attention-grabbing headline is further reinforced by the value of the sunflowers mentioned in both dollars and pounds (5 dollars and 4 Euros) in the text of the article.

Figure 11: Pieter Doorewaard and Philip Schutte await sentencing in Mahikeng. (BBC News South Africa "sunflower murder" farmers jailed, 2018).

The photograph of the accused, Peter Doorewaard and Phillip Shutte, in the dock strategically reveals the audience in the immediate background: a mix of red clothed Economic Freedom Fighters amongst the white attendees. The photograph signals the highly politicised nature of the crime and is indicative of how this incident played out in the wider social environment: eliciting widespread attention of white farmers, political parties seeking to capitalise on the situation whilst also ostensibly seeking justice for the victim and the majority black community. It is also indicative of the ideological polarisation and racial division that fractures South African society. A reductive noun glosses over the aftermath of the murder: "The killing triggered tension in the town of Coligny, Northwest Province" (ibid). Elsewhere it is reported that:

> Mosweu's death, in October 2017, set off a "mass violent protest" in Coligny that
> "left six houses and three trucks torched and several shops looted and damaged"
> (Silesho 2018).

The adjectives used by the judge in passing the verdict, "disgraceful" and "appalling" reflect the insensitivity and wanton disregard for human life by the perpetrators. It also echoes the public perception of the crime. The inconsistency in reporting on this crime warrants attention. In a subsequent BBC report on appeal (DIN 7), the pair were exonerated citing insufficient

evidence to exclude reasonable doubt. However, in the first article (DIN 6) it is reported that the victim was "thrown from a moving truck". In the subsequent article (DIN 7), BBC reports that the victim "fell off while they were taking him to the police station". These are significant differences that impact upon the adjudication of the crime and would have elicited different conclusions.

While it was deemed a cause for celebration by Afriforum (who financed the appeal to the Supreme Court), the decision to set Peter Doorewaard and Phillip Shutte free predictably caused outrage and consternation in the black community. The following Facebook comments are a sample of the scathing response the revised judgement elicited:

> "This is so much unfair, and even if he really stole, they had no right to take the law into their own hands" (Name withheld 18, 2018).

Several other quotes testify to the polarisation of views on the trial and its aftermath:

> wish African can get their respect back. If the judicial system can't protect people we are doomed as a people. (Name withheld 19, 2018).

> African justice system or rather world justice system flavours a certain colour of people individuals leaving out the ones that need it the most blacks (Name withheld 20, 2018).

> Criminal justice systems world over are biased on basis of skin colour. The family of the black boy must live with that pain forever. Sunflower they say.... Sad (Name withheld 21, 2018).

Collectively, the personal feelings generated by the overturned verdict and ventilated on Facebook speak to the meta-discourse of racial discrimination and to the view that the police and the judiciary are biased in their treatment of black people. These comments speak to the high levels of frustration experienced at the decision to free the perpetrators and reinforced perceptions of racial bias in the courts. It also fuelled the notion that black people have no option but to mete out justice themselves:

> I hope they family finds a means to meet out their own justice (Name withheld 22, 2018)

> Justice system in South Africa is just a big shame. How can it protect murderers against an innocent child. Can Africa court of justice take over this case and listen afresh? We need them Outside. Jail was actually protecting them (Name withheld 23, 2018).

We are not going to forgive those people. Those people must go to jail; they killed. So, if the law doesn't take them back to the cell, we are going to do more. You will see, the whole place will burn. I'm not joking (Name withheld 24, 2018).

Well, they may appear to be 'free,' but I tell you what, they're not free. They've just effectively been handed a set of ball and chains to drag around with them all the rest of their wretched lives, because they'll be forever looking over their shoulders until something happens. Tick tock tick tock tick tick (Name withheld 25, 2018).

anyone with their addresses? I just want to drop in for a little chat (Name withheld 26, 2018).

In the last comment, revenge is euphemistically described as "a little chat". The court decision also prompted a revaluation of existing understandings pertaining to politics and a hardening of attitudes:

The mistake Mandela did was not redistributing the lands the way Mugabe did in Zimbabwe (Name withheld 27, 2018).

Implications of the Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis of the selected articles from BBC News and IOL and their Facebook comments at both the micro and macro level reflect deep polarisation in South African society along racial lines. This polarisation takes the form of a positive representation of the in-group and a corresponding negative representation of the out-group. These aspects will be addressed comprehensively in the next chapter. As outlined in the methodology chapter, this study uses two theoretical models to investigate its corpus. We turn now to an application of Hall's theory of encoding/decoding.

Analysis of the corpus using Hall's Encoding/Decoding model

Hall's model of encoding/decoding was an approach to audience studies that used qualitative strategies to probe into how audiences read and interpret media content. The model focused on the repertoire of linguistic and cultural codes the audience have available to them to interpret and decode the messages they receive. In this study, this approach has been adapted to analyse the reception of online news via selected articles from BBC News and IOL. Selected news

articles and paratextual elements in the form of Facebook comments and hyperlinks they elicited will be analysed using Hall's model involving:

1. Hegemonic/dominant reading;

2. Negotiated reading; and

3. Oppositional reading

A discussion which should pre-empt this analysis is the commercial and ideological imperatives of both IOL and BBC news as it is vital to understand the process of news production and encoding. It must be understood that the production of news by these sites operates within a set of professional codes and existing structural, financial, organisational and political constraints on media production. These professional codes generate preferred meanings that "have the institutional, ideological and political order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalised" (Hall 1983, p.134). The news outlets encode their products in the interest of dominant hegemonic forces and reifies the Marxist conception that the ruling ideas of any given epoch are the dominant ideas of the ruling class. Hegemonic power is invested in governments and it is closely tied to the financial interests of megalithic corporations and the complex of institutional practices and rules that advance their interest. As Hall explained, "the professional codes operate within the hegemony of the dominant code" (1983, p.136). This is unambiguously apparent in Hall's first category of audience reception, the dominant/hegemonic position.

The first article (DIN 1), entitled, *#Black Monday: BLF slams 'racist' farm murder protest* from IOL, October 31, 2017, drew Facebook comments from singer and former 'Idols SA" winner, Heinz Winckler that are a negotiated position in response to the protest. As mentioned above, in a live video on his Facebook page, Winckler maintained that it was unreasonable of the protesters to try to get the attention of the international community:

> "They have their own problems, they are under terror attacks, they have got Isis, they have got immigrants and they have all sorts of issues they are dealing with" (Winckler 2017).

He went on to say wearing black was not going to solve the problem of farm murders, adding he believed that there were deeper-rooted issues that needed to be addressed:

> "Something has to change, that is true, but... is it going to help to wear black on a Monday? Respectfully, I don't think so... we are not going to solve farm murders as a specific problem if we don't look at... the real cause... of the problem; it is not a race thing, but we are making it a race thing... that is not the way we are going to get a better nation. We sit with an unbelievably unhealthy, dysfunctional social society, where we have... millions of people that grew up in a way that did not teach them what the average Afrikaans, white person was taught when they grew up" (2017).

In alluding to the deeper, systemic issues of land dispossession and equity with fellow South Africans on his Facebook page, Winckler elicited a torrent of dissent from supporters of white farmers and an emphatic condemnation of his negotiated position. These comments ranging from personal attacks to threats of financial boycotts were distinctly oppositional to the subject matter of the article as evinced in the headline, *BLF slams 'racist' farm murder protest.* Here the Black First Land First movement had tried to appropriate the symbolism of wearing black to protest the killing of white farmers into wearing black to protest the killing of black farm workers instead.

Oppositional positions against the BLF were by far in the majority and testimony to the fact that the white farmer movements, Afriforum and 'Genoeg is Genoeg' were organised on social media platforms, feeding into their own filter bubbles and serving as echo chambers for their hyperbolic perceptions of 'white genocide' and injustice. It also reflected the socio-economic disparity between black and white, with many affected blacks (mired in poverty) without access to the internet and literacy skills necessary to ventilate their perceptions on social media.

Negotiated comments coalesced against the killing of farmers but also ventilated frustration against the escalating rate of crime in the country:

> You kill a farmer you kill our rights to feed our children...and to make the food we eat affordable...it's easy when you steal and you don't have worry how much you spend on the stolen money...wake up (Name withheld 28, 2018).

Blacks also offered negotiated positions as evinced by:

> I'm waiting for the day we stop 'racialising' and start 'rationalising'. The crime rate in our country is alarming. We're even scared to sleep in separate room in case someone breaks in at night. Crime doesn't discriminate. I so wish we could co-exist, stand together as one and fight for our rights. We are so divided hence we keep falling. Our struggles are the same (Name withheld 30, 2018).

These voices were in the minority. The majority of comments fed into racialised discourses and were suggestive of the deep polarisation round the issue of farmland attacks and the heated politics around the possession of farmland.

The dominant comments sounded out the careful positioning of the BBC news portal, reporting on the protest but treading a neutral line:

> All people are victims of crime in SA it is not about skin colour . We all live in fear for our safety and for our children's safety . It does not matter what skin colour you are . you are a fellow South African and it is our duty to make sure we as mothers and fathers ensure a future for our children (Name withheld 31, 2018).

> In total support of todays protest, for every murder and rape in OUR country, yes OUR country. People, let's stand together an take OUR country back from the scum that want to murder rob an rape. Please do not make everything a racial issue, We can make that change by uniting for the best interest of this country and the beautiful people that live in it, cmon guys there is a start for everything, let it be now (Name withheld, 32. 2018).

These **hegemonic positions** were pleas for peace and respect for human and property rights and patently against the racializing of issues. Collectively, these hegemonic positions encouraged fellow users on Facebook to justify their opinions by factors other than race, which seems the first line of argument in the majority of cases.

The second article from IOL, (DIN 2), is entitled, *Hofmeyr: Government not doing enough to protect citizens*(Hofmeyer, Government not doing, 2017).

Steve Hofmeyer and deputy CEO of Afriforum Ernst Roets were among those marching to the Union Buildings protesting against the high rate of farm murders. Picture: Jacques Naude/ANA Pictures

Figure 12: (Hofmeyer, Government not doing enough, 2017)

This article appears in print and in an online edition in an IOL subsidiary, *The Diamond Field Advertiser,* with its target audience in Kimberley and the Northern Cape. The Facebook responses to this article were mostly of a dominant/hegemonic position

with shared cultural and ideological assumptions expressed. This is evidenced by the high number of shares and positive comments this article enjoyed such as the comment already quoted:

> "its really shocking what is happening in South African and the world keeps quiet, God Bless all of you, I am reposting this and will keep on doing so!" (Name withheld 33, 2017).

Of note is the ideology of the good Christian, devout in prayer and sacrifice, embedded as a sub text in the message of an all-white crusade. This creates an impression of a community galvanising against injustice and profligate evil. The article elicited similar comments such as were quoted earlier:

> "And there is already tens of thousands murdered!!That is genocide!" (Name withheld 34, 2017).

> "So now the good religious farmer bring food until he gets murdered" (Name withheld 35, 2017).

> "No Farmers... No Food!!" (Name withheld 35, 2017).

The negotiated position manipulates the ethos and position of the article to motivate a call for insurrection and smacks of nostalgia for apartheid. Hofmeyer (2017) is exhorted to do more to protect farmers and to lead a rebellion against the government:

> "Steve, bring the farmers together, become one power and let us take the country back and fix it, bloody man, there are many men who are waiting for a leader and weapons, come on Steve, so we were at one time one of the most feared people in the world. We are still here ….give our women and children the safety and we will as one, take our country back, come on Steve, you are a leader, your voice is big and strong!" (Name withheld 37, 2017).

The oppositional comments to this news post likened the campaign to spread awareness of farm murders to propaganda:

> "sounds similar to what happened pre-war Germany. Propaganda had people believing that the Jews were responsible for all that was wrong in the country and the people fell for it" (Name withheld 38, 2017).

The third IOL article (DIN 3) is headlined, *Farm attacks, social justice and our food security*(Ebrahims 2018). This Facebook comment is one instance amongst many that reiterates the dominant/hegemonic position in condemning Dutton, the Australian Minister of Home Affairs for his racist comments:

> "The hilarious reality of Dutton's "brainfart" - is that the S African government has (for 8 years) been trying to induce farmers to sell to black farmers (Name withheld 39, 2017). This is to redress the inequality of 10% population owning 70% of farms. This imbalance is a continuation of apartheid. But the farmers won't sell. In the meantime, the black population gets frustrated, and violence breaks out. So, the government upps the pressure - by threatening forced resumption - still the farmers won't sell".

> "So what in heavens name does Dutton think - that the farmers (on hearing his brave offer) will jump on the first plane, leaving their money behind" (Name withheld 40, 2018).

However, as may be anticipated in a polarised society, oppositional readings of the article challenged the accusations of racism by the journalist:

"Dutton could say that a "civilised country like Australia" needs to help white farmers in South Africa. It certainly smacked of racism unbecoming of a government minister, especially from a country South Africa has historically had good relations with".

"He is right. A civilized country doesn't threaten its own people with genocide, a civilized country doesn't threaten its people to steal their land, a civilized country never allows itself to decent to the brink of civil war with the people that have created this country. Most of all a civilized country never denies the true history and dismisses it as just racist" (Name withheld 41, 2018).

Oppositional comments chose to conflate suggestions of equitable land distribution with Marxism and failed states. In doing so these comments fed into the intense yet selective rhetoric of farm attacks that foregrounded the farm attacks and backgrounded to the point of Oppositional comments chose to conflate suggestions of equitable land distribution with Marxism and failed states. In doing so these comments fed into the intense yet selective rhetoric of farm attacks that foregrounded the farm attacks and backgrounded to the point of invisibility the colonial and apartheid dispossession of land which still persists today. One such comment is given by way of illustration:

"Less than three weeks ago, the South African Parliament passed a motion, by 241 votes to 83, to start the process to amend the Constitution to allow the appropriation of farms without compensation".

"The mover of the motion, Julius Malema is on the record saying in 2016 he was " not calling for the slaughter of white people, at least for now...". If this had been said by Duterte or a Balkans leader about Muslim minorities, the outrage would have been worldwide and condemnation, including calls for UN sanctions would have been swift" (Name withheld 42, 2018).

"Why the silence? Zimbabwe went down this path decades ago and it bankrupted their country and entrenched a radical despot. They went from a prosperous well-fed nation that exported food to a mendicant state with people starving. I have been there to see it" (Name withheld 43, 2018).

A racist slippery slope fallacy is further used to rationalise oppositional readings: "Going by the Zimbabwe example, they'll get starvation with their 'equality'. So, what if whites own 70% of the farmland, they manage better" (Name withheld 44, 2018).

The BBC article (DIN 4), South Africa coffin case: White farmers receive jail terms (2017) drew a flurry of Facebook comments across Hall's spectrum of hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional readings.

Most of the hegemonic comments echoed the reasoning of Judge Segopotje Sheila Mphahlele and the thesis of the article that justice has been served. These comments were consonant with the judge voicing outrage at the lack of remorse and at the overt racist assault that she says is deserving of severe punishment:

> "they got what they deserve, if he stole from you call the police... trespassing give him a warning, hence he was not a threat. Why did they have to torture and make a mockery of him, they threatened his life without any remorse instead they laughed at him" (Name withheld 45, 2017).

> "All those complaining that it was a harsh sentence for assault....... If you were the one being shoved into that coffin u were never gone say its a harsh sentence, they behaved like animals so let them go to the zoo where their species live" (Name withheld 46, 2017).

> "I hear people keep saying too harsh sentence! They don't understand this act by those idiots undermines our democracy after this long suffering as blacks life does not matter, this must be the lesson to other white idiots who think their dogs is better than a black person's life. There many similar cases that were not reported or filmed" (Name withheld 47, 2017).

The preferred meaning of the BBC is allied with the majority view and may be inferred from the statement: "The BBC's Andrew Harding in Johannesburg says the long sentences have been welcomed by many South Africans as a necessary warning." (South Africa coffin case, 2017).

Foregrounding the noun phrase , "the BBC's Andrew Harding" is a calculated production ploy to make it seem that the preferred meaning coincides with the expectations of the majority-creating the impression that the BBC is the 'peoples' online news portal, and that they share a common ideology, and their interests are similar. This is the way dominant codes by the BBC come to be accepted by the readers as their own, that is, the readers freely acquiesce to the subjection implicit in the preferred meanings of the BBC. It is in this way that institutions and media corporates exert ideological control and dominance.

The negotiated readings use agreement as a springboard to voice a radical politics:

> "it's payback time baba, their forefathers use to assault, kill, rape black people and get away with it...manje we rule this Country" (Name withheld 48, 2017).

> "they've should have got life in prison. Even those who are still addressing others as baboons they deserve the same treatment" (Name withheld 49, 2017).

> "in fact now that they have been incarcerated go and grab their pieces of land 😂😂😂" (Name withheld 50, 2017).

These negotiated readings also suggests that the bitter memory of racial discrimination and economic subjugation are deeply ingrained in the psyches of Africans. Many see it as a time to exact revenge and to celebrate the suffering of whites.

> "This calls for a celebration anyone up for a braai" (Name withheld 51, 2017).

> "The changed power differential is made apparent by the statement, "manje, we rule the country" (Name withheld 48, 2017).

The oppositional readings reify the fact that South Africans foreground race in their coding systems. Here the opposition to the preferred reading suggests killing the victim in copycat farm murders:

> "ja...they should've eaten him...or raped and killed him in front of his children..." (Name withheld 52, 2017).

"What one sided BS . A farm murder gets less years. All this guys did was have some fun with a criminal while waiting on the police" (Name withheld 53, 2017)

"Amazing how such a tough "man", talks so big between his 100....... friends but screamed like a girl when scared a little for being a criminal!!!!! Ouch, can only be anc or eff" (Name withheld 54, 2017).

A comment sympathetic for the accused duo also describes the crime euphemistically as "some fun", trying to make light of the matter. The oppositional interpretation also ridicules the victim as a spineless coward talking big in front of a black crowd but whimpering like a girl when shoved into a coffin. These comments once more highlight the fact that preexisting understandings/histories are brought to bear on events and shape interpretations consistent with strongly ingrained predetermined views.

The third BBC news post, *South Africa 'sunflower murder' farmers jailed* (DIN 6) was marked by firstly, jubilation at the conviction and sentence imposed and secondly, anger as the duo were released on appealing their conviction. These were the feelings inferred from the majority of black comments on Facebook pertaining to the "sunflower murder". Many whites (and given the case and its appeal were paid for by Afriforum) had contrary emotions. This once again highlighted a society polarised along racial lines.

The hegemonic comments were in the minority as most Facebook comments appear to be lodged on opposing sides of Van Dijk's (2013) ideological square:

"Lets say he stole the sunflowers and they wanted to take him to the police station. They shouldn't have taken the law into their own hands. They should call the police to arrest him. A bakkie is not designed to transport criminals. The reasonable person must foresee that he can jump off and be injured or kill himself. While a police van is safe to transport criminals That makes them guilty of manslaughter which also carries a prison sentence. Even if the deceased stole the sunflowers he surely didn't deserve to loose his life. Those convictees would have been better had they given him the sunflowers" (Name withheld 55, 2019).

"Our Judges 🇿🇦 here are independent and do their job without intimidation, that's the beauty of our conduct. We allow them to be and do so. The State will learn the contents

of the judgement and respond accordingly. Just sit back, watch and learn. Don't fall for the noise of "White" on "Black" headlines!" (Name withheld 56, 2019).

"They way they hate black people they decided to kill the young boy for sunflowers, the time for killing blacks for nothing is over now" (Name withheld 57, 2019).

The latter comment recognises that South African society is emerging from the effrontery of apartheid and shares the dominant view of the news site committed (ostensibly) to equity, justice and a professional code of ethical journalistic conduct. The sense of a commission of a crime and the excessive use of force was also captured in this comment:

"This is so much unfair, and even if he really stole, they had no right to take the law into their own hands" (Name withheld 58, 2019).

The negotiated comments, whilst satisfied with the conviction, demanded a harsher sentence:

"let the racists rot in jail" (Name withheld 59, 2019).

"They are going to need Vaseline in jail, Afriforum better send it to them" (Name withheld 60, 2019).

These comments betray how the experience of racial discrimination have shaped the thoughts of ordinary South Africans. Almost everything is viewed in an 'us' and 'them' mentality. The experience of life is filtered through an unconscious racial bias. The oppositional comments exemplify this:

"the witness LIED the 2 is innocent _ throw out the case!!" (Name withheld 61, 2019).

"Please hang that K who lied, our brothers WILL BE SET FREE" (Name withheld 62, 2019).

"He ended up like his stolen sun flower, monkey see monkey do" (Name withheld 63, 2019).

These oppositional comments show that whites have grown up in a state legislated culture of racism, with in-grown prejudice against blacks, commonly perceiving them to be thieves, vagrants and lairs. These stereotypical constructions allow them to speak of other whites

(whom they probably don't know) as 'brothers' falsely claiming solidarity based on skin colour. This explicit racism is also manifest on the other side of the ideological square:

> "Slaughter the two 🐷 and throw it to dogs" (Name withheld 64, 2019).

Conclusion to Hall's encoding/decoding analysis

Hall (1980) "has since stated that these positions are, ideal-typical or hypothetical-deductive positions. They're not empirical positions ... they are not sociological groups" (Yousman 2013, p. 199). No one is simply a negotiating reader, or an oppositional reader. In fact, these positions can operate almost simultaneously within audience readings of various moments in a single text.

The purpose behind outlining these hypothetical positions was to point out that the act of decoding a mediated message is multivalent and can happen in many different ways. There are many different legitimate and reasonable readings of a single text (Yousman 2013, p.201). These features are evident in the corpus subjected to analysis.

Hall suggests that the messages encoded in a text set the terms of the argument and define the field that meaning will be played out upon:

> "Unless they [audience interpretations] are wildly aberrant, encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decoding operates" (Hall 1980, p. 135).

Thus, it is essential to Hall that the notion of preferred meaning is retained on the encoding side of the model, because only by holding onto this conceptualisation of the model can the excesses of pluralism be denied (Yousman 2013, p. 202).

In the articles cited, it was clear that interpretations of the corpus reflected the ideological polarisation manifest in politically charged discourses. Conservative farmer groups and their sympathisers always interpreted issues from perspectives that coincided with their vested

interests. Those who advocated for equity and social justice for farm labourers offered mostly negotiated readings of the corpus.

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What does a semiotic analysis of selected news about the farmland attacks on the *Facebook* sites of *IOL* and *BBC News* (2017-2018) indicate?

A microanalysis of the BBC News and IOL sites using critical discourse analysis revealed the following insights:

The farm attacks in South Africa are characterised by certain distinctive features, the primary factor observed is the extreme degree of racial polarisation between black and white. In most instances, race is the key rationale upon which decisions are made and perceptions are formulated. Other tangible factors such as historic inequity, criminality, personal animosity in work relations etc. are elided when filtered through a racial prism by Afrikaner groups. Race becomes the organising rationale. This type of thinking perpetuates stereotypical constructs about race in which conflict is adjudicated in an 'us' and 'them' mentality.

Van Dijk's (2013) ideological squaring proved a useful instrument in conceptualising this polarisation. It illustrated a divide marked by racial invectives and generalised racism in which those from another race group were perceived as the enemy. Equally fallacious was an imagined solidarity based purely on the fact that one was of the same race. This is made explicit in the Facebook comment,

> "we have to save our brothers" (Name withheld 62, 2019)

and betrays a bandwagon mentality.

The study also reified persistent inequality and disparate social capital between white farmers and their supporters and black labourers and their sympathisers. White farmer groups were well organised to promote their agenda of 'white genocide', and to maintain strong ingroup ties online and lobby international conservative groups and power elites in support: Afriforum's Kallie Kriel and Ernest Roets were able to tour the United States and to elicit sympathy and support from President Donald Trump and Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo as an example. Blacks on the other hand suffered from a paucity of social capital and access to resources.

It is to the credit of the BBC news portal that they fact checked alarmist claims and slippery slope rhetoric by Afriforum with credible expert analysts that pointed out that farm attacks were a small fraction of crime in South Africa and should be treated like other serious crimes, not elevated to a national priority as advocated by Afriforum..

Particularly noteworthy was the foregrounding of information of farm attacks with gruesome detail in a diction of pathos. Rhetorical tropes of card stacking plain folks, emotional stereotypes and ad hominem fallacies were used to foreground the plight of white farmers. The use of celebrities such as Steve Hofmeyer and Heinz Winckler was also resorted to for persuasive appeal and to draw added attention and support for the campaign against farm attacks. This appeal for support was often couched in hyperbole, calculated fear mongering and euphemism to discount white atrocities against blacks on farms.

What was backgrounded in this discourse was the inequity stemming from blacks being dispossessed of land, white farmer assaults on black farmworkers and the exploitative economic relations that trapped farm workers in a cycle of poverty. Finally, there was the use of propaganda and manipulation to promote congenial self-images of the white farmer and advance notions of unjust persecution. For example, linking the collocations, "social justice" and "farm attacks", encourages the readers to formulate links in ways which they might not otherwise conceive of, directing them to a predetermined meaning. Furthermore, the use of the noun phrase, "social justice" in the context of galvanising support for white farmers is ironic and hypocritical because the black farm workers were denied the very same "social justice" by the white farmer groups themselves.

The second research question was as follows:

2. **How do users respond to news about these farmland attacks in the selected news sites on *Facebook*?**

Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding was used to analyse user comments on Facebook in response to a selected corpus from IOL and BBC News online. Hall's notion of dominant/hegemonic reading negotiated reading and oppositional reading were the three hypothetical constructs against which these comments were evaluated.

Dominant reading of the corpus

The dominant comments reflected the positioning of the news sites, decrying racialising the problem of farm attacks and emphasising the need for peaceful co-existence. These dominant positions encouraged users on Facebook to justify their opinions by factors other than race, which seems the first line of argument in the majority of cases. The BBC used the noun phrase, "the BBC's Andrew Harding" saying that "justice has been welcomed by the majority of South Africans" (ref), a calculated production ploy to make it seem that the preferred meaning of the news site coincides with the expectations of the majority. Hegemonic, cultural and ideological assumptions expressed by the news sites were manifest in the high number of shares and positive comments this article enjoyed.

Negotiated reading of the corpus

Negotiated comments coalesced against the killing of farmers but also ventilated frustration against the escalating rate of crime in the country. These negotiated readings also use agreement as a springboard to voice a radical politics, at times manipulated the ethos and position of the news sites to motivate a call for insurrection. In the 'sunflower case'(2017) negotiated positions. whilst being satisfied with the conviction, many demanded a harsher sentence for the perpetrators. It seems that negotiated positions always gravitated towards pre-existing and historical views in a type of 'negotiated confirmation bias'.

Oppositional reading of the corpus

Oppositional comments chose to conflate suggestions of equitable land distribution with Marxism and failed states, The use of propaganda and slippery slope fallacies were used to rationalise oppositional readings. At the other end of the spectrum, blacks expressed dismay at the release of the 'sunflower duo' and claimed that the justice system was racially biased, and that it pandered to the wealthy and was ineffective.

The final research question was as follows:

2.1 Why do users respond the way they do?

The user's response on Facebook may largely be categorised within the framework of Van Dijk's (2013) ideological square. These reflected deeply polarised views on either side of the spectrum indicative of the wider racial division and animosity that characterised South African society. The genesis of this may in turn be located in colonial and apartheid land dispossession explained in the literature review.

A contributory factor was the existence of sites calling for support for white farmers in campaigns to spread international awareness of "white genocide" and calling a halt to "farm attacks" by groups such as Afriforum and 'Genoeg is Genoeg'. An explanation of this may be found in algorithmic processes reinforcing 'filter bubbles' and 'echo chambers'. This is in sync with Fourie's (2020) observation that "'filter bubbles' often result in users having significantly less information about opposing perspectives and contradictory viewpoints, which causes the web user to become intellectually isolated in their own cultural and ideological bubbles". Filter bubbles distort thinking, an understanding of the world, and hindered the ability to make balanced decisions. The fact that Facebook's personalised news-stream curates news with 'filter bubbles' perpetuates news based on a user's digital profile and preferences inferred from a person's "browsing history, age, gender, location, and other personal data" (ibid). This ensures that a person sees only 'relevant' results. This personalised ecosystem resulted in 'filter bubbles' where Facebook users are bombarded with information centred around their preferences, and very little of what they really should see to establish an objective and balanced reality. Perhaps the claim of an objective and balanced reality is overstating the case since any message, from its inception, is never neutral and is already encoded with a hegemonic code espousing a particular view of the world. Nevertheless, the BBC and IOL news online, when

viewed in tandem with the Facebook comments elicited, created an 'augmented reality' that reinforced pre-existing bias and drowned out oppositional comments.

Negotiated readings in agreement with sentences imposed on the perpetrators of violence on blacks clamored for harsher punishment. This suggests that the bitter memory of racial discrimination and economic subjugation are deeply ingrained in the psyches of Africans. Many see it as a time to exact revenge and celebrate the suffering of whites while moderate 'negotiated' and 'hegemonic' responses rallied for an inclusive society and the rule of law with certain preconditions.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion, recommendations and limitations of the study

Racial polarisation was the dominant code that permeated the corpus on the farmland attacks. On the one hand, white farmer support groups such as Afriforum and 'Genoeg is Genoeg' reified white dominance and privilege in mobilising their constituencies to draw national and international attention to farm attacks. The white farmers in groups formed a particular protest institution online and offline marked by cultural citizenship premised on race and self-interest buoyed by their social capital. This increased social capital was used to foreground farm attacks using a victimhood mentality and placing in the background the exploitative relations, abuse of farm workers and failure to negotiate inequity and to acknowledging land dispossession.

On the other hand, Black farmworkers and their supporters were able to challenge the status quo by articulating their perspectives in Facebook comments. Van Dijk's (2013) ideological square recorded binary perceptions whereby many white farmers perceived the attacks to be racially motivated, while many black labourers and their supporters perceived the attacks as being labour related. The predominantly comments by black respondents:

> challenged the features that contributed to the perpetuation of structured inequalities, 'exposing power abuse and mobilizing people to remedy social wrongs' (Blommaert 2005, p. 25).

This perception shaped the discourse around farm attacks and very often drew bandwagon support from both black and white.

Facebook inadvertently reinforced these polarised perspectives by algorithmic curation of news manifest in the form of filter bubbles and echo chambers. The comments made on Facebook in relation to the corpus were in sync with Bodker's (2016) notion of an 'augmented commodity' which saw the postings as heteroglossic sites of struggle and the articulation of group racism.

Hall's theory of encoding/decoding highlighted the fact that interpretation of the news corpus emanated from individual subjectivities which revealed pre-existing bias in the form of hegemonic and negotiated readings when news corresponded to their interest and oppositional readings when it did not. This is turn highlighted the ideological and constructed nature of the

text circulated around dominant/hegemonic meanings encoded by the journalists writing for BBC News and IOL.

A microanalysis of the corpus using critical discourse analysis unearthed the rhetorical tropes of card stacking, plain folk, euphemism, slippery slopes, ad hominem responses, pathos, propaganda and emotional stereotyping in the discourses of exaggerated victimhood and Afro-pessimism by white farmer interest groups. These discourses were recognisable by positive self-representation and negative representation of the other.

Finally, both CDA and Hall's encoding/decoding theories, when viewed in relation to citizen journalism in the form of Facebook comments, decentered the role of BBC News and IOL in communicating hegemonic ideologies and messages to consumers.

Limitations of the study

This study would have yielded deeper insights and more complex constructions had the corpus widened to include an Afrikaans news online. The omission of interest group interviews in the form of semistructured and focus group data recruitment further limited the reliability and validity of findings.

Recommendations for further study

Finally, a theoretical flaw is evident in Hall's encoding and decoding analysis. Hall failed to recognise the limiting potential of language as a form of signification. For example, Eskimos have many words for snow whilst other cultures do not. This implies that the limits of signification negatively impacted polysemic encoding/decoding and calls for a revision of Hall's theory to accommodate this perspective. It is the conviction of this researcher that new insights may be gleaned from this study.

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APPENDICES

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Supreme Court overturns convictions of two farmers in Coligny 'sunflower' murder (timeslive.co.za)

Miss Laila Sheik (214581029)
School Of Arts
Howard College

Dear Miss Laila Sheik,

Protocol reference number: 00005098
Project title: Decoding news framing and reception: An investigation into the discourses on Facebook news sites
(BBC, IOL and Daily news) around reports of the South African farmland murders from 2017 to 2018

Exemption from Ethics Review

In response to your application received on   6 February 2020, your school has indicated that the protocol has
been granted **EXEMPTION FROM ETHICS REVIEW.**

Any alteration/s to the exempted research protocol, e.g., Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research
Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through an amendment/modification prior to its
implementation. The original exemption number must be cited.

For any changes that could result in potential risk, an ethics application including the proposed amendments must be
submitted to the relevant UKZN Research Ethics Committee. The original exemption number must be cited.

In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE:
Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours sincerely,

Prof   Chatradari   Devroop
Academic Leader Research
School Of Arts

UKZN Research Ethics Office
Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE FOLLOWING DISSERTATION HAS BEEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITED.

Decoding news and reception: An investigation into the discourses on selected Facebook news sites around reports of the South African farmland attacks (2017 to 2018)

Candidate: SHEIK L

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