

SHEPHERD MPOFU'S FACEBOOK RANTS: A CASE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A THREAT FOR KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

As a relatively new media, social media has been fairly researched by scholars emanating from Media and Communication Studies, Political Science, Public Administration and Sociology, just to mention a few. A considerable effort has been invested by these scholars to explore the dynamics and implications of social media. But the understanding of this phenomenon remains uncommon; yet most of the contributors to this discourse operate from Euro-American consciousness - which does not accurately capture the essence of African reality. Based on qualitative materials and Afrocentricity, this paper concedes that generally social media births casual social relations. But it argues that its unguarded nature as reflected in Mpofo's Facebook rants constitute an imminent threat to knowledge development in South Africa.

Keywords: Facebook; Social Media; Knowledge; Development; South Africa.

SHEPHERD MPOFU'NUN FACEBOOK SÖZLERİ: GÜNEY AFRİKA'DA BİLGİ GELİŞİMİNE BİR TEHDİT OLARAK SOSYAL MEDYA VAKASI

ÖZ

Nispeten yeni bir medya olan sosyal medya, sadece birkaçından bahsetmek gerekirse, Medya ve İletişim Çalışmaları, Siyaset Bilimi, Kamu Yönetimi ve Sosyoloji alanlarından gelen akademisyenler tarafından oldukça araştırılmıştır. Bu akademisyenler, sosyal medyanın dinamiklerini ve sonuçlarını keşfetmek için önemli bir çaba sarf etmiştir. Ancak bu fenomenin anlaşılması nadirdir; yine de bu söyleme katkıda bulunanların çoğu, Afrika gerçekliğinin özünü tam olarak yakalamayan Avro-Amerikan bilinciyle hareket etmektedir. Niteliksel materyallere ve Afrocentricity'ye dayanan bu makale, genellikle sosyal medyanın gündelik sosyal ilişkileri doğurduğunu kabul etmektedir. Ancak, Mpofo'nun Facebook rantlarında yansıtıldığı şekliyle korumasız doğasının, Güney Afrika'daki bilgi gelişimi için yakın bir tehdit oluşturduğunu savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Facebook, Sosyal Medya, Bilgi, Gelişim, Güney Afrika.

INTRODUCTION

On the 16th February 2023, at 23h46, I posted the screen shot of the working title for my completed research project entitled "Grappling with the *Ndebelification* of Gukurahundi studies", with a tag "done and dusted", as my WhatsApp status update. This was munched by one of my contacts and shared with Shepherd Mpofu, who is an Associate Professor of Media Studies at the University of South Africa. I would not fathom the motive for the exchange of this information between one of my contacts and Mpofu because this was never meant to be a secret. However, it may not be far-fetched to assume that the motive was to stir an academic controversy. This is because Mpofu had previously unleashed another Facebook rant over our published journal article on Gukurahundi (Shai & Vunza 2021). On the following morning of the 17th February 2023, the munched screen shot was posted by Mpofu (17 February 2023) on Facebook with the following rant which is reproduced verbatim for the purposes of completeness:

"Pathetic scholarship nothing will come out here. The problem is peer review system in these journals where you pay to publish! Lack of critical peer review will make people venture into studies they have no glue about. In a previous article Shai has argued Gukurahundi is not genocide because there are no vernacular terms for it as it is a Western concept. Then he uses the UN definition of genocide which actually places Gukurahundi as a genocide. He further claims those of us who write on it are supporters of Zapu. Which Zapu does not exist".

I was alerted to the above sequence of developments by a colleague who also disguises as Mpofu's mutual friend on Facebook. Unlike Mpofu, my current position in the academy and society at large does not permit me to take part in cyber-bullying and hate speech. My academic maturity also prepared me never to address research questions by becoming unnecessarily personal or seeking legal intervention; even when the matters at hand bothers on criminality as it relates to hate speech and cyber-bullying (South African Lawyer 2022). I am not enticed by conflict management mechanisms which have a potential to stifle academic debate. I am not in any way suggesting that Mpofu's rants are academic. Hence, the correct characterisation "rant", which denotes a wild and angry talk or writing which reveals silly or confused attitude. The only thing that makes Mpofu's Facebook rants mimic academy is the fact that they were largely provoked by my papers on Gukurahundi, one published (co-authored) and the other in press (sole authored) (Shai & Vunza 2021; Author 2023).

Against this background, this paper uses Mpofu's Facebook rant (cited above) as a test case to explore the status and legacies of social media in South Africa's knowledge creation and development. To achieve this, the paper adopts and uses a narrative approach and interdisciplinary discourse analysis (Achankeng 2023). Equally important, the paper is based on Afrocentricity partly because of its usefulness in fostering epistemic justice (Asante 2003, Mazama 2003). Structurally, the current paper is based on seven sections. The first section is the current one, which provides a contextual orientation of this paper. The second section accounts for the choice and use of the theoretical and methodological design. The third section serves more or less as the justification for the development of this paper and it is themed "Mpofu and the necessity to address his rants". Subsequent to this is the primacy of this paper, which assumes three sections which are themed as: pathetic scholarship! nothing will come out here, the real problem in journals, Peer reviewing "it", "us" or "them" and discontinuities in Gukurahundi studies. Based on the discussion and analysis of the findings of this paper, a conclusion is drawn in section seven.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

This paper is underpinned by the theory of Afrocentricity as articulated by scholars such as Asante (2003), Mazama (2003) and Modupe (Modupe), just to mention a few. It also draws its insights from the Turfloop Afrocentric School (Author 2021; Makoka 2023). Afrocentricity was chosen as an alternative and contextual theoretical lens for this paper because of its cognitive and functional abilities (Mazama 2003). It was also chosen as a theoretical framework for this paper because much research on its subject is based on Northern angled theories, philosophies, ideas and concepts, which are essentially rooted in Euro-American consciousness (Author 2016). I am not suggesting that Northern angled theories such as liberalism and neo-realism have no place in the study of African phenomena. The point being driven home is that African issues can best be studied and understood through tools and standards that are based on African value system (Asante 2007). In form and content, this paper is Afrocentric because its point of departure is the

African phenomena (Gukurahundi), the interlocutors are Africans, I also enter this discourse and positions myself in it as an African. Thus, I am committed to the production of knowledge which is deliberately biased towards the interests of the Africans and it seeks to liberate them from poverty into development. The choice of this theory is very critical for this paper as it also informed the decision about the research design; hence the theoretical framework is not only viewed as part of the literature review; it is also understood as an extension of the research design. Methodologically, this paper is based on qualitative materials (i.e. published and un-published documents) and interdisciplinary discourse analysis. The author of this paper is passionate about stories, both verbal and textual. For this reason, this paper assumes a narrative approach. The data emerging from the discourse is analysed critically and descriptively; and then presented in sub-themes. Contextually, the researcher occupies a central position in the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the research for this paper. Hence, there is a truth that is often downplayed within the scholarly circles. Such a truth is that data cannot collect and analyse itself. As such, the whole notion of objectivity is dismissed in this paper as non-existent. Thus, it is nothing more than the inter-subjectivities of those who are regarded as the knowers of truth. For this reason, I argue that this research, like those done before it and those that will be done in future, it is not culture or value free. It is centred on the lived experiences of the Africans and considers this paper as the by-product of the power relations between the knowledge and the knower (Smith 1999). It is also instructive for the reader to note that this paper is dismissive of the binary standing of knowledge as either good/bad and empirical/ non-empirical; thus knowledges complement one another (Maserumule 2011).

MPOFU AND THE NECESSITY TO ADDRESS HIS RANTS

It can be argued that there is no research that is innocent (Smith 1999). Related to this, Konai Thaman's endorsement of Smith's (1999: endorsement page) book retorts that "It will empower indigenous students to undertake research which uses methods that are culturally sensitive and appropriate-instead of those which they have learned about in Research Methods courses in universities which assume that research and researchers occupy some kind of moral high ground from which they can observe their subjects and make judgements about them". It then follows that Mpfu's rants are neither scientific or academic by any measurable standards. But they are more personal and political or to say the least; it represents the jealousy of some of the old and expatriate academics against the young and local academics (Maserumule 2012; Khunou 2019; Mudau, Mokgokong & Khanya 2021). But Mpfu's rants still deserve a scholarly attention because research can also be personal and/or political. Whatever the case that may be, the fact is that Mpfu occupies an important position in the South African society. He is a National Research Foundation (NRF) rated researcher who is attached to the University of South Africa as an Associate Professor in Media and Communication Studies; a very position he has previously occupied at the University of Limpopo. Mpfu is also a Ndebele of Zimbabwean origin and he possesses a Doctor of Philosophy in Media Studies from Wits University. The above facts are important as they talk to the heart of positionality, a very ontological standing that informs his understanding of research and other critical issues in the society (Asante 1990). On his Facebook handle he claims to be fluent in sarcasm and he blocks those who attack his friends.

PATHETIC SCHOLARSHIP! NOTHING WILL COME OUT HERE

By merely looking at the title of the research project whose contents are unknown to him, Mpfu burst that it amounts to pathetic scholarship and nothing will come out of it. This is a dogmatic observation and/or just a simple "rage" which does not have a safe space in the knowledge industry (Jansen 2022). It suggests that the scholarship which does not conform to Mpfu's views amount to stupidity. Ironically, I and my supposed interlocutor (Mpfu) are working for universities in South Africa. The subtle message from Mpfu is that when it comes to research, I am pathetic because of my national origins. I cannot imagine of any other excuse. Hence, my scholarly standing has been recognised by my peers through our institutional processes and national processes as presided by the NRF and the defunct Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) (Olivier 2020). International peer recognition saw my services as a Political expert being sought by universities in The Gambia, India, Zimbabwe and etc (Jain 2022). In South Africa, it is not uncommon for some minorities to undermine the local academics. The knowledge agenda of South Africa is defined by the minority and the minority seek to keep South Africans at bay. Hence, it is believed that through

employment equity, South Africans have a lot of opportunities in the public and other sectors (Shai & Mothibi 2015). Therefore, the minority should keep the knowledge industry to themselves. This is a reality that is overlooked by prominent educationists such as Jonathan Jansen, who also belong to the minority. According to Jansen (2022: online) “co-existence with migrants from other African and, indeed, Asian countries was threatened as the competition for limited resources was politicised around national origins”. Jansen attributes this sorry turn of events to the locals, both ordinary and elitist. Contrary to Jansen’s take, I argue that expatriate academics such as Mpofo are victims of self-inflicted traumas. It is true that some expatriate academics have contributed to the development of Black South Africans through the supervision of Masters and Doctoral qualifications. But it should also be acknowledged that not all expatriate academics are adding a meaningful value to South Africa. When it comes to supervision, some of them gives a preferential treatment to international students, especially those from their countries of origin. They easily do this because even when it comes to the recruitment of postgraduate students, they become intentional and target prospective international students from their countries of origin. Even if they get involved in the supervision of local students, they normally do the shoddy work as their products barely makes it for a career in academia. Alternatively, they target influential local students whom they can exploit to secure opportunities for lucrative consultancies. Above all, it should also be stated that even the majority of those expatriate academics who really make a difference in the lives of South Africans do not purely do so out of love, passion and commitment. The primary idea is for them to make a living as academics who are gainfully employed and any improvement in the well-being of the locals is a spill over effect. Hence, most expatriate academics did not voluntarily migrate to South Africa. But they have been forced by the political and socio-economic conditions of their countries of origin. For this reason, much of their co-authorship, scholarly collaboration and partnership tend to be with their fellow countrymen as opposed to the locals. These are some of the painful realities of the contemporary knowledge industry which are observed by the politicians; but the local academics (including seniors) hardly talk or write about them because they do not want to raffle the feathers, which is deemed in some circles as un-professorial.

The pre-existing prejudices of Mpofo on my scholarship has propelled him to employ exaggeration in his evaluation of my work. Even if my work (sole and co-authored) could be of a lower standard, it can never be reduced to “nothing”. It is “something” as it made an addition to the corpus of literature on Gukurahundi and related issues, Peace and Conflict Studies. Besides, it has laid a fertile ground for public and scholarly debate. Hence, the subject was afforded an opportunity to be revisited on social media (public), in this paper (academic) and elsewhere. Contextually, it could be argued that the subtheme of the section of this paper, which is derived from Mpofo’s Facebook rant is an attempt by him to invoke profanity. Profanity is conventional in the Arts, politics and business but not common in academia (Kirchherr 2022; Tourish 2020). Given the fact that systems borrow from one another for the purposes of self enhancement, it may not be overly wrong for Mpofo to draw from other sectors and employ profanity in academia (Author 2021). The foregoing should be understood within the context that profanity is generally important in life as it keeps us wide awake or standing with our feet against the unwanted (Kirchherr 2022). But it is problematic when profanity is employed in this instance wherein Mpofo is not familiar with the paper’s contents. Even if Mpofo was disappointed by the paper that I have previously written and published, there is no guarantee that current and future research projects by my kind self will also be hopeless. This is because learning is a lifelong process and we perfect the art of writing through practice. Thus, every experience is a learning curve in the life of an academic.

THE REAL PROBLEM IN JOURNALS

Mpofo argues that the central problem for what he terms my “pathetic scholarship” is the compromised “peer review system in these journals where you pay to publish!”. Whether this argument is true or not is beyond the scope of this paper. What I found opportunistic and concerning is the double standards employed by Mpofo when it comes to the treatment of these journals. For example, it is not like Mpofo only publishes in journals which do not charge page fees. His rise to Associate Professorship at the University of Limpopo and ultimately, at the University of South Africa was also propelled by articles which were featured in journals that charge page fees. It would appear that the peer review system is only weak when the journals feature the articles by Mpofo’s rivals and/or those which push a narrative which is not in line with what he considers to be true. There is no scientific basis for claiming a relationship between page fees and articles

acceptance rate. The truth of the matter is that we have good and bad journals which charge page fees. We also have good and bad journals which do not charge page fees. For example, the journal that has published my work on Gukurahundi charges R1000 in article production fees. Surely, it would be wrong to think that such a journal is driven by the desire to make profit. Besides, he also published in the same journal and edition. The amount of R1000 is just too little and it is not even enough to produce an article. For this, I submit that this journal is truly committed to the creation and development of scholarship especially by those scholars who are in the periphery. That scholars pay to publish in such a journal shows a desperate misrepresentation of facts by Mpfu to achieve narrow and short term goals. As scholars we owe it to the academic community to tremble with indignation as per challenge by Noam Chomsky (undated) who reminds us that “It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies”. Interestingly, *African Journal of Rhetoric* is not a pre-paid publishing outlet. Authors are only invoiced after the work has been published and this meagre contribution is largely used to recover the printing and postage costs. Besides this, editors are advised by peer reviewers as to whether to accept or reject a submission (Sebola 2022). The manner in which the payment of page fees affect the acceptability of a journal submission is un-imaginable. This is because reviewers are not involved in the financial affairs of the journal they service and at times, they do not even know whether such a journal charges page fees or not.

PEER REVIEWING “IT”, “US” OR “THEM”

In academia, some reviewers are critical and others are not (Sebola 2022). For Mpfu to paint all reviewers with the same brush is unfortunate. There could be a shortage of critical peer reviewers. But contributors are never guaranteed that their papers will land in the hands of an uncritical or less critical peer reviewer. When we write articles for normal journal editions, we do so out of self-driven interest. In the case of conferences or special editions, like the one on genocide, we write in response to the call for papers which resonates with our interest on certain topical issues in the society (Khan 2022). As such, peer review is an after-thought when it comes to the conception and operationalisation of a study. Peer review is a function beyond the control of the author and it is something that never pre-occupies the mind of any reasonable scholar. Besides, most journals make use of double blind peer review (Sebola 2018).

That people (including myself) venture into studies they have no glue about sounds like a desperate attempt by Mpfu on gatekeeping (Sebola 2018). As scholars, we have a right to research about any research problem in the society (Higgins 2013). It cannot be correct that Gukurahundi studies need to be monopolised by Ndebeles of Zimbabwe origin like Mpfu. There is an overflowing body of academic, official and popular literature on Gukurahundi (Mpfu 2019; Ndlovu 2019; Dube 2021; Mpfu 2021). A non-Ndebele can enter this discourse by simply revisiting this literature with an alternative theoretical lens. Whether his/her (author) findings please Ndebeles like Mpfu is immaterial. Whatever form and nature the findings take cannot be prescribed by a reader because research design is a pure decision of the researcher and it is also dictated by the choice of the theoretical framework (Makoka 2023). For example, you cannot arrogantly insist that people have no idea about Gukurahundi simply because they have not undertaken fieldwork and/or watched a particular documentary about it. Hence, in the Afrocentric paradigm that some of us have found an epistemic location, written and oral texts are equally important (Milam 1992; Maserumule 2011). Also, modern science encapsulates philosophy which largely draws from interpretive paradigm- as it was the case with our published article on Gukurahundi (Ramose 2022a).

DISCONTINUITIES IN GUKURAHUNDI STUDIES

Mpfu notes that in a previous article I have argued that “Gukurahundi is not genocide because there are no vernacular terms for it as it is a Western concept”. He goes on to aver that I have used United Nations (UN) definition of genocide which actually places Gukurahundi as a genocide. I am further accused by Mpfu who alleges that I have claimed that those who write on Gukurahundi are supporters of Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU). If the foregoing observation is anything to go by, it is clear that Mpfu has looked for me on the discourse on Gukurahundi, but as Ramose (2022b) would argue ‘he certainly could not see me’. Consequently, he began to fictitiously imagine things about me. For example, at least until Mpfu’s Facebook rants I have never sole authored any piece of work about Gukurahundi. In the article, co-authored (essentially) with my colleague, we have problematised the etymology of the term

“genocide” and then, questioned its application in the African context (Shai & Vunza 2021). Our argument is clear and I am unapologetically upholding it here. Genocide is emotionally and politically charged and therefore, subject to exploitation by both individuals and organisations. UN is yet to declare Gukurahundi as a genocide. It is never too late to advocate and persuade the UN to make such a declaration. During the earlier stages of Rwanda genocide, the UN along with the United States of America (USA) has disputed it and later, acknowledged it, with an apology hailed from Washington DC, the capital and administrative hub of the USA government (Author 2016). Even if the UN was to declare the Gukurahundi as a genocide, that could not preclude us as scholars to engage with such a characterisation. The greatest weakness of Mpfu is selective reading. We have gone into great length to argue against the characterisation of Gukurahundi as genocide (Shai & Vunza 2021). As such, I will challenge the reader to revisit our original published article on Gukurahundi instead of relying on the summarised but deliberate misrepresentation of facts by Mpfu. Contextually, UN’s definition of genocide has three properties and our argument is straightforward, Gukurahundi does not fully satisfy such (United Nations 1948).

The reduction of Gukurahundi studies to supporters of the defunct ZAPU is a false creation of Mpfu, which is malicious by all intents and purposes. In our co-authored work (whose 2nd author is deliberately erased by Mpfu in his recent rant) we contend that “From the literature, it is clear that most authors have allowed their political affinity or inclination towards either ZANU or ZAPU to sway the direction of their findings” (Shai & Vunza 2021: 229). Any sober learner of History at a High School in Africa would know that both ZANU and ZAPU are defunct following their incorporation in what today is known as Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) during the year 1987. This point is well captured in our published article. But Mpfu overlooks it because he wants to paint a false picture that the things I write about Gukurahundi are riddled with gross factual inaccuracies. There is nothing absolutely inaccurate about Gukurahundi except that Mpfu and his co-assailants are hell-bent on subjecting distant observers to what is known as the ‘dangers of a single story’. I think Mpfu has a serious problem. In his first Facebook rant, he violated my first name and misspelt it. In his 2nd Facebook rant, he erases my title and first name, then only addresses me with my surname. Ideally, I should not be addressing him because he does not appear interested in having a scholarly conversation with me. His interest is on the other person he has created in his mind. Contextually, ZAPU may not be existing. But we still study it as historical institution that once featured on Zimbabwe’s political landscape. It remains in the collective psyche of the Zimbabwean elders and it does not need to exist to be studied. A quick cursory of the English dictionary reveals that affinity or inclination denotes attraction, leaning or penchant (Cambridge Dictionary 2023). This feeling is not only expressed in relation to existing beings; hence some beings like ZAPU may no longer be existent but the ideas they stood for are known and well-documented. Therefore, it is not unusual for scholars to assume a posture that is pro-dead or the living-dead.

CONCLUSION

I wish to conclude this paper by recasting the opening observation of our published journal article on Gukurahundi, “... this paper is not the last word on this subject. It could be enriched through field work with the survivors of the genocide, relatives of the victims and the veterans of both ZANU and ZAPU” (Shai & Vunza 2021: 236). The current paper maintains the above observation. But it stretches the line of thought by arguing that Mpfu’s penchant to take the title of my unpublished academic paper and rubbish it on Facebook is an expression of academic paranoia. His idea was never to enrich the discourse. But to compromise the blind peer review of my paper by cultivating seeds of prejudice among his Facebook followers. It cannot be ruled out that Mpfu’s rants were aimed at humiliating my persona and scholarship with the hope of using my envisaged fall as a ride to get the attention; which he clearly needs. In fact, the rants that Mpfu harbours represent an aggression of attributes that announces Jonathan Jansen’s (2005) polemic question: “When does a university cease to exist?”. A university’s existence is threatened when its professoriate (including Mpfu) violently denies the multiplicity of viewpoints. Unless Mpfu’s rants are tamed through an enforceable social media policy, they run a risk of bringing his employer, University of South Africa into disrepute. In the final analysis, I find the unpacked distortion of facts by Mpfu very wrong and it is supposedly and emphatically, also aimed at advancing a particular sacred agenda at the expense of the other. Lastly, this paper is indeed a stepping stone for future research on this subject and

those that will follow it will even be more bettered through the contestation of ideas; which is the true essence of scholarship.

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