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'Tapanduka Zvamuchese': Facebook, 'Unruly Publics', and Zimbabwean Politics

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Word count, excluding abstract: 9,300

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'Tapanduka Zvamuchese': Facebook, 'Unruly Publics', and Zimbabwean Politics

This paper examines the role that a Facebook account operating under the name Baba Jukwa played in the run up to the Zimbabwean 2013 election. It argues that Baba Jukwa was able to convoke an 'unruly public' that was situated in opposition to the state-controlled public sphere, and one that was transnational in its reach. Through a close examination of the posts by Baba Jukwa and the debates they generated, it uncovers the key features of this public, namely, the use of symbolically laden pseudonyms, the emergence of a vernacular discourse that was articulated in multiple registers, and the prevalence of conspiracy theorizing. The paper also highlights the way that these publics are inflected by older socio-cultural and political practices, and the efforts of participants in the public to creatively fused the past and the present.

Keywords: unruly publics, conspiracy theory, speech registers, Zimbabwe, pseudonyms

Introduction

On the 23rd of March 2013 a new Facebook account was opened under the name Baba Jukwa, who claimed to be a disillusioned ZANU (PF) insider turned whistle-blower, who was working to expose the party's misdeeds, and ensure that it lost the impending elections. Within weeks the page came to be seen as an important source of information about Zimbabwean politics, and on Election Day, the 31st of July, Baba Jukwa had 317,000 Facebook followers. This figure was substantially higher than the followers that Robert Mugabe (111 523) and Morgan Tsvangirai (94 615), the two main candidates in the presidential elections, each had. Baba Jukwa's daily posts were widely read, debated and disseminated, and his Facebook page increasingly began to serve as a discursive forum where Zimbabwe's history and politics were fiercely debated. Importantly, it also represented the most significant effort to use social media as a political tool in Zimbabwe

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up to that point.

The social and political role of digital technology in Zimbabwe is becoming an increasingly important subject of study amongst scholars, though much of the existing work is still coming from the field of communication and media studies. The first wave of literature beginning in the late 1990s showed, among other things, the ways that the Zanu PF government's efforts to police the media and silence dissenting voices, resulted in the internet becoming an important alternative site for Zimbabweans to congregate and discuss issues of common concern.[1] The studies provide detailed case studies of the deliberations on sites like Zimnet.com, NewZimbabwe.com, Inkudhla.net, Goffal.com and Kubatana.net.[2] With a few exceptions, most of the studies view these online spaces as constituting an alternative 'public sphere' in the Habermasian sense.[3] There is, however, some ambivalence about the democratic potential of these digital forums, as some studies have shown how online discussions about national or ethnic identity often become acrimonious.[4]

In this paper I build on the second wave of literature that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring. This literature examines the varied ways that digital platforms such as social media are being utilized in Zimbabwe, while eschewing the techno-determinism of the scholarly work and popular commentary that immediately followed the Arab Spring uprisings. Owing to the prominence that Baba Jukwa's page assumed in the run-up to the 2013 elections, it is no surprise that it has become the focus of a number of studies. Bruce Mutsvairo and Lys-Anne Sirks, for example, investigate whether Baba Jukwa was able to facilitate an increase in democratic participation in Zimbabwe.[5] For Joseph Mujere and Wesley Mwatwara , Baba Jukwa's Facebook page provides an example of the many forms of citizen journalism that have been enabled by the

expanded access to information communication technology in Zimbabwe.[6] In another study, Admire Mare examines Baba Jukwa through the lens of social movement theory, and explores the way that Facebook was used to advocate for political change.[7]

By contrast, my paper undertakes a closer reading of the posts by Baba Jukwa and the debates they generated. I argue that Baba Jukwa was able to convene an 'unruly public'[8] that situated itself in opposition to the state-controlled public sphere, and one that was transnational in its reach. The paper highlights three main features of this public, namely the use of symbolically laden pseudonyms, the emergence of a vernacular discourse that was articulated in multiple registers, and the prevalence of conspiracy theorizing.

The capacity of digital media to convene publics is increasingly gaining acceptance among scholars.[9] There are, however, some important critiques to this position. The first focuses on the ways that publicity has been used to advance the interests of the state and capital, as opposed to citizen's goals.[10] It is certainly true that governments have taken advantage of digital media in order to effect surveillance while corporations has sought to 'monetize people's connectedness'. However, it is worth bearing in mind that historically, 'actually existing publics' have often been connected in varying degrees with the state, capital or the church. A second objection has centered on the content of the discussions within these publics, and has questioned the capacity of digital platforms to facilitate 'serious' deliberation. This position is taken by Aaron Hess in his study of the use of YouTube by the US Federal government to communicate its anti-drugs campaign. While he acknowledges the presence of 'fragments' of vernacular discourses that critique the government's policy, Hess concludes that YouTube is largely unsuited to deliberation. His argument has two main pillars, the first being an analysis of the

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constraints imposed by the affordances of YouTube as a digital platform. The second is an analysis of the content of the discussions on the platform. In his regard he observes that:

> Much of the content found on YouTube is dismissive of serious discussion and an examination of the most popular uses of YouTube indicates that entertainment and play are much more fitting comprehensions of the website. Often, serious discussion is juxtaposed with crude humour and user arguments in the form of flaming. Paired with the use of pseudonyms and inability to draw from traditional sources of authority due to copyright restrictions, any serious discussion found on You Tube is lost in the ether, ineffective in its ability to assist in deliberation.[11]

The question of the affordances that Hess raises is an important one, as digital architecture shapes the interaction between participants on online platforms. However, he is less persuasive in his dismissal of all that does not fall into the category of 'serious discussion', such as playfulness, crude humour, and heated arguments that at times involve profanity.

A key problem with Hess' perspective is that an implicit set of normative ideas, which echo Jürgen Habermas' conception of the public sphere, serve as a yardstick against which all political deliberation is judged. As a consequence, certain registers are valorized as 'serious discussion', while others are dismissed. It is possible, however, to recover the political significance of other speech registers by adopting a different conception of the public sphere. Chantal Mouffe's notion of the 'agonistic public sphere', for example, provides a way of making sense of the passionate, and at times uncivil, debates amongst citizens. In agonistic struggle, she argues, "Adversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponents' right to fight for the victory of their position".[12] Significantly, Mouffe sees this kind of agonistic struggle as an

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important condition of a vibrant democracy. However, this conception does not apply to the

public convoked by Baba Jukwa due, in large part, to the centrality of moral critique within it. In

many of Baba Jukwa's posts, and in the comments beneath them, Zanu PF was regularly

described as "evil". This charge was backed by numerous allegations of heinous acts it had

committed, or was actively conspiring to commit. As Mouffe points out: "With the 'evil them'

no agonistic debate is possible, they must be eradicated."[13]

A more suitable approach to thinking about Baba Jukwa's Facebook page is that which

has been proposed by Michael Gardiner, and applied to the study of social media by Luke

Goode, Alexis McCullough and Gelise O'Hare.[14] For Gardner, a key shortcoming in Habermas'

work is the idealized picture that he presents of a bourgeois public sphere that is characterised by

dispassionate rational disputation. Gardiner draws instead on Mikhail Bahktin's account of the

early modern European market place and public square, in order to formulate an alternative

understanding of the public sphere. "In such contested spaces," he argues:

> …existing social hierarchies were often questioned and subverted through carnivalesque
> strategies of remarkable variety and invention, including the use of parodic and satirical
> language, grotesque humour, and symbolic degradations and inversions. There never was a
> 'golden age of the communicative utopia': the *real* public sphere was always marked by a
> pluralistic and conflictual heteroglossia.'[15]

Gardiner describes these spaces as 'wild publics' or 'grotesque symposiums', while

Goode, McCullogh and O'Hare characterize the social media equivalents of these spaces as

'unruly publics'. What is particularly important about this conception of the public sphere, is the

emphasis on its heteroglossic qualities. Drawing on this insight, my paper uncovers the multiple

speech registers that were typical of the vernacular discourse that emerged on Baba Jukwa's page. These included reasoned argument, diatribe, the expression of religious sentiment, as well as a carnivalesque mode of expression.

In characterizing these as publics 'wild' or 'unruly', the above scholars seek to capture their non-conformity to, or refusal to be bound by, the Habermasian public sphere ethos, or any other normative ideals about civility and structure in public debate. However, a qualification is necessary. These terms should not blind us to the fact that, over time, a set of norms emerges within such publics. Indeed, it might be said that 'unruliness', paradoxically, becomes a norm. Such was the case on Baba Jukwa's page, where the use of pseudonyms as a symbolically laden form of political self-representation became an important norm. In addition, a political grammar gradually takes shape within these publics. As alluded to above, a vernacular discourse emerged on Baba Jukwa's page whose features included a moral critique, the use of multiple speech registers, and a preoccupation with conspiracy theorizing.

There is a second sense in which the public that was called into being by Baba Jukwa can be viewed as 'unruly'. This is in its stubborn defiance to Zanu PF's efforts to discipline public debate, a stance which was underscored by the slogan '*Tapanduka Zvamuchese*' (we have rebelled completely), which was regularly 'chanted' by participants of the debates on the page. From the year 2000, the space for public debate in Zimbabwe progressively shrank, due to legislation that empowered the government to police public speech, ban public gatherings, arrest journalists and shut down privately owned newspapers and radio stations.[16] This was accompanied by efforts by Zanu PF to saturate the state-controlled media with its propaganda.[17] It was within this context that Baba Jukwa's page emerged as a space in which citizens defied

the repressive laws, openly critiqued the government, and spoke irreverently about the political

elite. It was also a space that proved to be difficult for the government to control, despite its best

efforts.

As highlighted above, a key feature of the debates on Baba Jukwa's Facebook page was

the prevalence of conspiracy theories. There is now an extensive Africanist literature on rumour-

mongering and conspiracy theorizing, from Luise White's work on rumours about vampires in

colonial Kenya[18], to the many studies of conspiracy theories about HIV and AIDS in the post-

colonial period.[19] This literature has broadly moved away from seeking to verify conspiracy

theories, or questioning the sanity of those who believe in them. Instead scholars have come to

see them as alternative interpretive schemes, which are intimately connected to the social and

political contexts in which they arise.[20] In his study of Algerian conspiracy theorizing during the

1990s, Paul Silverstein argues that it: "Constitutes a form of 'vernacular' knowledge production

– contrasting with overlapping 'official' modes of media and scholarly knowledge production –

that outlines an alternative 'truth regime' with its own discursive rule, institutions, and diffusion

networks".[21] Simon Turner has also shown how conspiracy theories in a Burundian refugee

camp in Tanzania provide valuable insight into the fears, hopes and anxieties of Burundian

refugees.[22]

An important question, however, has to do with the political significance of these

conspiracy theories. The classification of conspiracy theories as alternative or 'subaltern'

political opinion is attached to the view that they are forms of resistance to dominant social or

political institutions and discourses.[23] However, Silverstein challenges this perspective in

arguing thus:

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…contemporary Algerian conspiracy theorizing, while enacting a severe critique of the
state's role in the civil war, can actually serve to reinforce state power. Allegations of the
'putchist generals' pulling the strings of the war fosters the belief that the military remains
the sole true power base in Algeria, regardless of the many (religious, ethnic, secular)
challenges levied against it … Seen from this, admittedly conspiratorial point of view, the
Algerian state can deploy those conspiracy theories putatively against it to constitute its own
regime and increase internal militarization and surveillance. And once again, conspiracy
theories become their own self-fulfilling prophecy.[24]

In this paper I argue, with Silverstein, that the conspiracy theories that proliferated on
Baba Jukwa's Facebook page were double-edged. On the one hand, they helped to advance a
moral critique of Zanu PF, by pointing to its alleged nefarious plots to assassinate perceived
enemies, embezzle national funds, and steal elections. On the other, they painted a picture of an
invincible political party that was able to work in the shadows to frustrate the legitimate
aspirations of the populace, and in so doing they aid Zanu PF's hegemonic project.

My paper is draws on digital ethnography that began in May 2013, when I started
actively following the Facebook pages of Baba Jukwa and Amai Jukwa. In addition to Facebook,
I followed the debates about Baba Jukwa on other digital platforms such as WhatsApp, and the
discussion boards of newspaper websites. As part of this process I regularly archived Baba
Jukwa's posts and the comments that they attracted, as well as news articles that were published
by local and international media organisations. My digital ethnography was complemented by
fieldwork in Zimbabwe conducted between June and September 2013, a period that included the
2013 elections. The fieldwork allowed me to ground the online debates within the pre-election

social, political, and economic atmosphere in Zimbabwe, and to examine them in relation to the debates that were taking place in offline spaces.

The paper is also based on the textual analysis of the approximately 533 posts that Baba Jukwa made between the 23rd of March 2013 the 31st of July. I subjected these posts and the comments they generated to two 'readings'. The first reading was undertaken in real-time during the election run-up in 2013, as the posts came online one at a time, amidst avid anticipation about what the latest revelations would be. Reading the posts while I was in the field, and witnessing the sense of fear, hope and anxiety about the impending elections, allowed me to gain first-hand insight into why Baba Jukwa gripped the popular imagination to the extent that he did. The second reading was undertaken well after the 2013 elections, and involved going through all 533 posts in sequence. This allowed me to get a good sense of the political project behind the Facebook page, and the way it shifted over time, the different types of posts, as well as the variations in diction which suggested that more than one person was behind the page. With the benefit of hindsight, it was also possible to identify more clearly see the rumours, untruths, and conspiracy theories that were circulated by Baba Jukwa.

With respect to presenting the material, I have selected specific comment threads that are representative of the broader set, and analyse these in more detail. I have largely opted not to alter the original language and orthography of the posts and comments, in order to faithfully capture them in the form that they were written and read. In the case of Shona comments, I have therefore inserted translations in parentheses. However, with long quotations I have only presented the translated version. I have also anonymized the identities of all the individuals who participated on the page using their real names. In what follows, I begin by giving a brief

background to Baba Jukwa's Facebook page, before turning to an examination of three key features of the unruly public he convened, *viz* the use of symbolically-laden pseudonyms, the employment of multiple speech registers, and the prevalence of conspiracy theory.

The Emergence of Baba Jukwa

What is intriguing about Baba Jukwa's page is the fact that, despite its popularity, the identity of person(s) behind it remain unclear. In June 2014 two brothers, Edmund and Philip Kudzayi, were arrested and charged with using the Facebook page to try and overthrow the government through unconstitutional means. However, the charges were withdrawn before plea in May 2015 due to lack of evidence.[25] It is therefore not possible to speak with certainty about who was behind the Facebook account, and what their specific political agenda was. What is clear, however, is that the immediate trigger for the emergence of Baba Jukwa, was the desire to counter the attacks being levelled at Gideon Gono (the then Reserve Bank Governor) and Morgan Tsvangirai, through a Facebook account operating under the name Amai Jukwa.[26] In response, Baba Jukwa cast himself as the estranged husband of Amai Jukwa, and used his page to dispute her claims, and to counter them by making 'revelations' that were designed to embarrass Zanu PF officials and expose the party's malfeasance. Significantly, he sought to seize the moral high ground by claiming to be performing a civic duty, and described himself as a "concerned father, fighting nepotism and directly linking communities with their Leaders, Government, MPs and Ministers".

During the first few weeks Baba Jukwa experimented with different modes of address, and by May a standard format began to emerge. The posts were generally addressed to

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"Zimbabwe", which denoted the nation at large, and they often contained what he claimed were top secret details about illegal plots being hatched by Zanu PF officials, or internal divisions within the party. Attracted by the promise of these revelations the number of followers of Baba Jukwa's page, based in Zimbabwe and abroad, swelled to several hundred thousand. These followers were from across the political divide, and included politically-active party members, non-partisan concerned citizens, and indeed apolitical individuals who were keen to hear the latest 'leaks'.

As the page became more popular from around late May, these posts provoked daily debates and regularly garnered over 700 likes, and between 500-1000 comments. Many of the posts created the impression that the party was imploding due to growing disillusionment, and that the ranks of the '*vapanduki*' (rebels) were rapidly expanding. The revelations were often followed by a call to action, and this often involved making phone calls to the persons identified as being behind the plot, using the phone numbers Baba Jukwa provided. He regularly signed off with the phrase '*Asijiki*', a Ndebele word which meant "we will never look back, or no retreat". His alternative and equally defiant signature ending, was the Shona phrase *Tapanduka Zvamuchese*. These two phrases served both as a message to the Zanu PF establishment, and a rallying cry for his followers who he regularly referred to as '*vapanduki*'.

The form that Baba Jukwa's page took was also shaped by global events. In presenting himself as a whistleblower, he was evidently influenced by Wikileaks' 2010 release of a large trove of confidential cables belonging to the American government. Baba Jukwa claimed to be a senior Zanu PF official who had intimate knowledge of the party's secrets, and was privy to its private deliberations. In addition, he claimed to have a network of informants within the party

and the government, who provided him with information. The overall impression he sought to create was that the gaze had been reversed, and that it was Zanu PF that was now under surveillance. Another international influence was the Arab spring which started in early 2011, and in which social media played an important role. It is clear from many of Baba Jukwa's posts that he was trying to use Facebook in order to bring about political change in the country, and some of his posts directly referred to the Arab Spring.

Unsurprisingly, Baba Jukwa provoked a significant amount concern within Zanu PF. It was widely reported in the press that Baba Jukwa had come up in the party's Politburo meeting, and that a US$ 300 000 reward had been offered for the identity of Baba Jukwa. In addition, the government was said to have approached Facebook in order to have the page closed down. The intimidating and/or probing messages received by individuals who were active on the page also suggest that there was some online surveillance being carried out by government or Zanu PF agents.

Pseudonyms and the Constitution of a Vernacular Discourse

Going through the comment threads on Baba Jukwa's page one is immediately struck by the fact that a substantial number of people who regularly participated in the discussions used pseudonyms. A significant number of these accounts appear to have been primarily set up in order to take part in the discussions on the page, and have thus lain dormant since 2013, or have been deactivated. In other cases, individuals took advantage of the facility on Facebook which allowed users to change the name attached to their accounts. For Hess, this practice of using pseudonyms is among the key factors that detract from online deliberation:

Names such as neozeed6, ElBastardoMagnifico, and imnotparanoiditstrue appear as dismissive of the importance of authority in deliberations, much in line with the nature and location of the vernacular. However, such pseudonyms hinder the ability to mobilize due to their flippant and anonymous comportment. In this sense, the medium of YouTube maybe too playful of an environment for an engagement with in-depth political controversy.[27]

However, Stephanie Newell's work in colonial West Africa shows that there is a long history of pseudonymity and anonymity, and that the study of such practices provides valuable insight into African print cultures and publics.[28] The same argument can be made for the use of pseudonyms on Baba Jukwa's page. These did not devalue the deliberation, but rather enabled it. Given the government's effort to police public speech, the decision to use pseudonyms was strategic. They enabled people to participate 'freely' on the page without having to self-censor, or fear of harassment by government agents. However, pseudonyms were not just as a means of masking individual identities. They were often a mode of self-representation that was symbolically and politically laden, and were integral to the constitution of the vernacular discourse that emerged within the public. At the same time, there was an element of playful mischief and experimentation to some of the pseudonyms used.[29]

The pseudonyms used on Baba Jukwa's page fell into three main categories. The first are those that resembled Chimurenga names, or the *noms de guerre* that were used during the anti-colonial war between 1966 and 1979.[30] As with many Chimurenga names, pseudonyms like Murenga Munhumutapa, Murozvi Mutota Wehasha, were based on the names of precolonial kingdoms and their leaders. Others used the title "comrade", an appellation that was commonly used by guerilla fighters during the anticolonial war. Examples include Cde Hondo Tongogara, Cde Mazanu Muchasura, Tichatonga Macomrades, and Cde Chematama Bornfree. There were

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also instances of borrowing from other parts of the continent, as is evident in the Gikuyu-based

pseudonyms Matigari Muchaneta and Matigari Majirungi. The adoption of pseudonyms that

resembled Chimurenga names suggests that the individuals in question viewed this new struggle

against the authoritarian Mugabe regime in similar terms as the older struggle against colonial

repression. Indeed, some participants in the debates referred to the movement Baba Jukwa was

trying to foster as 'The fourth Cyber Chimurenga'. The pseudonyms also signified the importing

of older modes of political self-representation onto a new digital platform, and illustrates the

ways that the old and the new were being creatively fused on digital platforms. This practice was

particularly meaningful, given the fact that since 2000, Zanu PF had sought to legitimate its rule

by monopolizing the 'liberation struggle', and propagating a selective and self-serving version of

the past.[31] The pseudonyms therefore represented an attempt by citizens to re-appropriate that

history, and re-deploy it in their efforts to challenge Zanu PF's rule.

A second category of pseudonyms are those that were based on Baba Jukwa's name, or

his two popular slogans 'Asijiki' and 'Tapanduka zvamuchese'. Within this category are names

such as Mohammed Jukwa, Stacey Ndapanduka Jukwa, Prince Jukwa Mandoo, Jukwaress

Mupanduki Mukuru, Asijiki Jukwalene, VaHosi WaJukwa, Tahrirsquare Asijiki, Snowden

Wekwa Jukwa, Vatete Zvamuchese, Asijiki Matabeleland South, Jukwandolski Chemhere, and

Sekuru Jukwa Cyrus. These names communicated both the individuals' sense of being part of the

addressed public, and their identification with Baba Jukwa's cause. Apart from the playfulness

evident in pseudonyms like Jukwaress, Jukwalene and Jukwandolski, many of these pseudonyms

established a familial tie with Baba Jukwa. A public, as Michael Warner points out, "is a

relationship among strangers", and here we see efforts to flesh out this relationship through establishing a form of online fictive kinship.[32]

The third set of pseudonyms comprised of those that were carnivalesque in character, and often combined humour, vulgarity and a sense of irreverence. These were intended, among other things, to taunt government agents who tried to uncover the identities of the people participating in the discussions on Baba Jukwa's Facebook page. They included aliases like Mboroslovik Bechnov, Tsika Jende, Jende Guruguru, Mukoma Engine Gejo, Chidhumo Namasendeke, MudamburiMudashuri Wenharo, Skidmore Duzvi, and Mutochimwanyamachiisamuhomwe Mabvongodze. The ribaldry and linguistic innovation of the names in this category is clearly exemplified by the pseudonym Mboroslovik Bechnov, which consisted of the Shona words for male and female genitals respectively, which had been given what appears to be a Slavic twist. This carnivalesque reference to bodily parts is also evident in the alias Jende Guruguru which translates to Great Big Testicle.

Others pseudonyms were based on existing names that were appropriated and adapted for use on the page. An example was the alias Robert Gabriel Matibili, which was a politically laden variation of the president's name. The decision to use the surname of the president's biological father, who was a Malawian-born migrant worker, conveyed the implicit message that Mugabe was actually Malawian by descent. This was significant given Zanu PF's efforts to delegitimize the voices of dissenters by defining them as being outside of the nation. The profile picture on the account was that of Mugabe with a halo above his head, which was an ironic allusion to his middle name, Gabriel. Through the use of humor, irony and oblique references, the individual behind the pseudonym was making a subtle critique of the president's legitimacy and character,

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one that would have been intelligible to many who participated in the debates on the page. In sum, far from detracting from the deliberation on the page, the use of pseudonyms was in fact integral to the constitution of the 'unruly public', and the vernacular discourse that emerged within it. Pseudonyms were vehicles for conveying subtle political critiques, and a means of contesting the ruling party's exclusionary political discourse, and its monopolization of the history of the anti-colonial war.

Vernacular Discourse and its Multiple Registers

The different categories of pseudonyms used on Baba Jukwa's page were also a reflection of the multiple registers that were employed in the public. These included reasoned argument, diatribe, carnivalesque commentary, and expressions of religious sentiment. These different registers are evident in the debate that was provoked by Baba Jukwa's 5th of July post that revealed an alleged Zanu PF plot to rig the elections. The post alleged that an Israeli company, Nikuv International Projects, had been engaged for the purpose of "tampering with names on voters rolls and rigging elections". These efforts were purportedly being led by Daniel Nhepera, the Deputy Director General of the Central Intelligence Organisation. Baba Jukwa also posted mobile phone numbers that he claimed belonged to Nhepera and Dzimiri, and encouraged people to call and "tell them we know their evil intentions. They must not sleep, even if they switchoff their phones keep trying them and flood them with messages."

As with many of his posts, this one received several hundred 'likes' and comments. The comment thread began with people responding to Baba Jukwa's post, then as the number of comments grew, individuals began to engage with each other and the debate continued for four

days. Among those who believed Baba Jukwa's post and took his call to act very seriously was

Rodney Tapudzayi. In a lengthy comment, he presented a reasoned argument about why

Zimbabweans in the diaspora needed to engage with political processes in Zimbabwe. His

comment read in part:

> *Vapanduki veri* [who are in the] diaspora WAKE UP. If you really think whats going on in
> ZIM does not affect you think AGEN n AGEN. It's a fact thousands of zim diasporans have
> been officially denied their postal vote, for evil reasons we now know.
> http://www.newsday.co.zw/2013/06/29/diasporans-denied-voting-rights/ Many more are
> illegally registered as voters in places they have never set foot in. If you think we'll, *Que sera
> sera*, whatever will be, will be, there's nothing I can do about it now, you are wrong.
> Whatever Rotten ZANU will do with your stollen vote will affect you directly an indirectly,
> unless *wakwazvara nedombo uri one ari ega* [you were born by a stone as an only child]. If
> they win thru rigging your vote they will continue their evil policies & retrogressive
> behaviour and our mothers & *Hama* [relatives] will continue to suffer…. *Assiijiiki*

Whereas Tapudzayi's comment was a plea to Zimbabweans living abroad, Norman took

the form of a tirade that consisted of a series of rhetorical questions posed to the other members

of the public. Significantly, he chose not to use a pseudonym:

> And the old man has the audacity to tell all and sundry at their combined star rally
> (remember all ten provinces were represented at that woeful rally), that if Sadc do stupid
> things Zimbabwe will pull out. What is it with this bunch of old politicians, everytime the
> heat gets high in the kitchen they flee, its what they did with Commonwealth and last year
> were literally begging that grouping to be admitted back. Why do they think Sadc will beg
> them not to pull out? why must we be isolated from the rest of the world because of ageing,
> useless clueless idiots who fold themselves up when the world tells them of their errors.
> Grace [Mugabe] was even struggling to keep the old man steady as he wimpered along,
> shame on Zanu *sies* [an expression of disgust].

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The affectively charged nature of the comment did not necessarily detract from his contributions to the discussion. Rather, the sense of outrage and frustration it conveyed lent force to the substance of the arguments, and resonated with the way other participants in the debate felt.

Other responses to Baba Jukwa's 'revelations' were of a religious character. A case in point was the series of comments made by Fdu Xr, which were shaped by his/her Christian faith. The first was a prayerful lament which read: "*Mwari wemasimbaose ngavatibatsire. todiiko panyika pamakatiisa nhai Jehovha weHondo. ahh baba* [Almighty God please help us. What can we do on this earth where you have placed us, oh God of war. Ahh father]". This was followed by "we thenk you baba Jukwa for this genuine cause of exposing these evil satanists. may God give grant you a long, peaceful and prosperous life. may the new zimbabwe come." His last comment largely consisted of the lyrics to a hymn: "*mweya wangu chinyarara, Mwari anoziva nguva. Achaita sekuda kwake. iye ondipa zororo*. [Be consoled my soul. God knows the right time. He shall do his will] i feel like cry for my motherland." The fact that Fdu Xr's comments appeared beside others that used a copious amounts of profanity, underscores the heteroglossic nature of the public that Baba Jukwa convoked.

Not everyone was persuaded by Baba Jukwa's revelations, however. Among the sceptics were Zanu PF supporters, some of whom decided to challenge the views of Baba Jukwa and his sympathisers. Their contributions often took the form of taunts, and tended to provoke a torrent of passionate responses that were peppered with vulgarities. A Zanu PF supporter who attracted a lot of venom went by the pseudonym Versatile Multipurpose Missions. Within an hour of Baba Jukwa's post appearing online, Versatile had made 15 comments directed at Baba Jukwa

and other followers of the page. Many of these were taunts and vulgar insults that were deliberately designed to provoke. Icelolo Isaivanhu was amongst those who took exception to the posts and decided to respond in kind. His first comment read "@ Versatile *machende ari kumeso seeToki* [you have a scrotum on your face like a turkey]", while his second which was directed at Zanu PF supporters more broadly read "*Matuzvi ari muhuro sehwiza*' [You have shit in your neck like a locust]".

The grotesque images which were evoked by Icelolo were fairly common on Baba Jukwa's page. While they often employed humour and mockery, they also expressed a degree of anger about the mismanagement of the country and the resultant deep economic crisis. However, the problem with the carnivalesque register, was that it could easily slip into the category of hate speech. Lindiwe Mazambani's response to a comment by Elias Jaji, a Zanu PF supporter, illustrates the thin line between the two speech genres. Mazambani was a regular participant in the discussions on Baba Jukwa's page, and she played something of a leadership role in shaping the debate and encouraging people to respond to Baba Jukwa's calls to action. In addition, she often crossed swords with Zanu PF supporters who posted on the page. In this instance she took exception to the efforts by Jaji to intimidate people and stop them from heeding Baba Jukwa's call to action. She shot back in Shona:

> Elias Jaji what are you trying to do here? We will not be holding back the stick just because
> the baboon has urinated out of fear. You are still being made to lick Psychology Maziwisa's
> [a Zanu PF spokesperson] anus little boy. There is no-one of your age here, the person of
> your age is Chatunga [Mugabe's teenage son]. I hope you die from drinking the faeces
> contaminated water that we are being made to drink by Chombo [the Minister of Local
> Government] who embezzled the money for water treatment. I hope you die from a road

accident. You praise Zanu PF which has failed to maintain our roads and as a result our relatives are dying [of road accidents]. You have an anus that goes on periods. Meanwhile, *Vapanduki* those people must not sleep, call them from 6 to 6 so they don't sleep, those dogs. … We are at the State House, knock knock Gire and Roby of the abnormal testicles [reference to Grace and Robert Mugabe], get out so that the Jukwa family can enter, *asijikiii*.

The defiant tone of Mazambani's response was underscored by her emphatic closing declaration *'asijikiii'*. Her irreverent reference to the president as "Roby of the abnormal testicles" was a vivid example of the mockery and degradation of the official that was often expressed on the page. This contrasted sharply with the practice by the state controlled print and broadcast media during the period of the Government of National Unity (2008-2013), of prefacing any reference to Mugabe with a string of titles, in an attempt to give the impression that his power had not been diluted by the power sharing agreement.

At the same time, however, there are unsettling elements of homophobia in the comment. The reference to Psychology Maziwisa was not a random one. Baba Jukwa had accused him of being a key conspirator in a number of plots, and had also labelled him a homosexual, which was intended as an insult. Similarly, the critique of Zanu PF's poor service delivery record in areas such as water provision and road maintenance is disturbingly packaged as a wish that Jaji meet with a violent or painful death. While it is clear that the carnivalesque register was effectively employed to critique and ridicule the powerful, it is also evident that it was always at risk of slipping into hate speech.

Online Conspiracy Theorizing

A key feature of Baba Jukwa's posts was the preoccupation with conspiracy theories.

These conspiracy theories often had to do with one of three things: Zanu PF's plans to rig elections, its embezzlement of diamond revenues, and plots to kill people who were thought to be undermining the party's interests. These conspiracy theories were an integral element of the moral critique of the Zanu PF government that was being articulated by Baba Jukwa and many of the followers of his page. The nefarious plans that were allegedly being hatched by Zanu PF were presented as proof of the party's decadence. Conspiracy theories also served the practical purpose of mobilizing the public. As such, they often preceded a call to participate in some form of action which would help to ensure that Zanu PF was defeated in the impending elections. Baba Jukwa regularly provided phone numbers of government officials and encouraged his followers to contact them and challenge their actions. What is worth noting here is the way that, on the one hand, the emergence and operation of the public depended on the creation of a digital space that was relatively outside the state's reach. On the other, Baba Jukwa actively sought to bridge this distance and remove the barriers that insulated government officials from the citizenry, and prevented them from being held accountable.

Joost Fontein's analysis of the rumours that circulated after the 2005 mass eviction campaign in Zimbabwe, Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order, is particularly instructive in our attempts to understand the political significance such conspiracy theories. Fontein maintains that: "...the plethora of rumours – what Ellis (1989) called 'pavement radio' – which circulated on the streets and sometimes in newspapers, about the 'true' intentions and 'hidden' political agendas that lay behind Operation Murambatsvina act in a way similar to Mbembe's cartoons, reinforcing the omnipotent presence of the ruling party elite, and its ability to deploy devastating state power' at will."[33]

Similarly, although the conspiracy theories on Baba Jukwa's page represented efforts to uncover the secret machinations which had enabled Zanu PF to retain power for 33 years, the image they projected of the party aided its hegemonic designs. At a time when the party was, in fact, riven by divisions, they gave the impression of invincibility. The problem with this image is that it undermines citizens' appreciation of their own power, and their ability to come together and effect political change. Such conspiracy theories are at their most dangerous when they appear to be vindicated, as was the case in 2013 when Zanu PF won the elections, a result which many viewed as a triumph of the party's rigging machinery. This presents the risk of engendering voter apathy and a general disengagement from political processes, as people become convinced that the outcome of elections are pre-determined. This, in turn, allows Zanu PF to entrench itself in power. As such, while at first sight, conspiracy theorizing appears to be a practice of resistance, it ends up aiding hegemonic projects.

The wide acceptance of the conspiracy theories Baba Jukwa circulated is partly explained by the fact that they were being disseminated in a period of heightened pre-election anxiety. This made people more likely to believe stories about malevolent forces working in the shadows to undermine the will of the people. Digital technology also played an important role. Through Facebook, Baba Jukwa was able to circulate conspiracy theories to thousands of people in the country and abroad, rendering them almost instantaneously ubiquitous. As a result, they quickly filtered into the body politic, spawned new versions, and gradually came to shape the way the elections were viewed and talked about. The amount of traction the conspiracy theories gained is also explained by Zimbabwe's authoritarian political system. Rumours and conspiracy theories abound in such contexts due to the secrecy, censorship, and general lack of transparency that

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prevails. In such environments, rumours and conspiracy theories become important forms of alternative political opinion which seek to uncover the inner workings of the regime. It is for this reason that conspiracy theorizing, as a communicative practice, has a long history in Zimbabwe, and why this older way of talking about politics figured prominently on Baba Jukwa's page. It also comes as no surprise that Baba Jukwa was the subject of a number of conspiracy theories, including one which maintained that he was a Zanu PF plot to distract the electorate with his 'revelations' while the party worked in the shadows to maintain its hold on power.

A factor that made people more likely to believe Baba Jukwa's claims was his apparent vindication in the matter of Edward Chindori-Chininga, the Zanu PF parliamentarian for Guruve South, and chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Mines and Energy. On the 10th of June Baba Jukwa posted the following warning: "The Mashonaland Central mafia of the Kasukuwere dynasty is planning to sink Edward Chindori-Chininga and replace him with their puppet." This, he alleged, was because they believed he was "cooperating with Baba Jukwa to divulge the information about some of the things which are taking place in the party and in the province." Nine days later Chindori-Chininga died in a car accident on his way back from his constituency. In several posts that day, Baba Jukwa claimed that his warning had unfortunately come to pass. In addition to uploading the picture of Chindori-Chininga's wrecked car, Baba Jukwa identified a number of individuals who he claimed were responsible for his death. It should be said, however, that Baba Jukwa's initial post did not explicitly say that there were plans to kill Chindori-Chininga. In other parts he seemed to suggest that the plans were to 'elbow' him out in the Zanu PF primary elections.

Aside from Baba Jukwa's claims, what made Chindori-Chininga's death suspicious was its timing, coming as it did shortly after his committee had tabled its damning report about the shady dealings in the Marange diamond fields. Despite the determined efforts by other branches of government and the diamond mining companies to impede its investigations, the committee had persisted. The fact that Chindori-Chininga had previously served as the Minister of Mines and Mining Development between 2000 and 2004, meant that he is likely to have known where to look for any hidden skeletons. The final report, which was embargoed for three years, revealed that there was a huge discrepancy between the figures that diamond mining companies claimed to have remitted to the government and the amounts that were recorded as having been received by the treasury.[34]

The second source of suspicion was the fact that he had died in a car accident. This is widely believed to be the common means by which senior politicians, military officials and business people who have fallen afoul of Zanu PF meet their end. Car accidents have also figured prominently in Zimbabwe's postcolonial canon of conspiracy theories relating to mysterious deaths. The fact that Chindori-Chininga had survived another accident in March of the previous year, on his way to his constituency, did not help matters. In the minds of many people following the story, the damning committee report seemed to provide a motive, while the car accident was the 'smoking gun' which linked the death to Zanu PF.

Baba Jukwa's post announcing the death evoked an outpouring of emotions that ranged from dismay to rage. The majority of those who commented believed that he had been assassinated, and some felt that Chindori-Chininga should have taken Baba Jukwa's warning seriously. This was clear in Vatete Zvamuchese's comment which invoked Shakespeare:

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CASSIUS: Fellow, come from the throng; look upon Caesar.

CAESAR: What say'st thou to me now? Speak once again.

SOOTHSAYER: Beware the ides of March.

CAESAR: He is a dreamer; let us leave him…

(THIS IS HOW CC [Chindori-Chininga] FAILED TO HEED BABA JUKWA'S
WARNING).

A large number of comments focused on the photograph of Chindori-Chininga's wrecked Jeep Cherokee, and expressed disbelief that the accident could have been fatal given the limited damage to the car. Others pointed out that his expensive sport utility vehicle would have had safety features such as airbags to prevent the accident from being fatal. Yet others chimed in with a list of other individuals whose suspicious deaths had come by way of car accidents. Predictably, there was a great deal of insults directed at Zanu PF. What is important about the saga, however, was that it lent credibility to Baba Jukwa's claims.

The credibility that Baba Jukwa gained from the Chindori-Chininga affair helps to explain why many people were willing to confront the Malawian President, Joyce Banda, on social media over an allegation that Baba Jukwa made on the 2nd of July. Baba Jukwa's post alleged that '…Joice Banda who is the incoming SADC chairperson has reached a deal with my evil ZANU PF party to win the elections in exchange her country is given a stake in our diamonds….' In several posts on the 3rd of July Baba Jukwa encouraged his followers to go on President Banda's Facebook page to "drop her as many messages as you can, telling her to back-off or face the fire". The following day he took things a step further by providing what he claimed were the Malawian President's mobile phone and landline numbers.

It is not clear what prompted this post about President Banda at that specific moment in early July. However, suspicions about her position on the Zimbabwean crisis had been expressed within the media during her five-day state visit in April 2013, which included officially opening the annual Zimbabwe International Trade Fair alongside Mugabe. The state visit was viewed as a Zanu PF ploy to curry favour with Banda as the incoming chairperson of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). This was because the regional body was overseeing the resolution of the political crisis in Zimbabwe, and would have an influential voice in endorsing the outcome of the elections. Excerpts of Banda's speech at the opening of the Trade Fair[35] essentially endorsed the key claims of Zanu PF's propaganda, which held that there was no crisis of governance in the country, and that the party was simply the victim of a regime change agenda orchestrated by western governments. This reinforced a long held view that SADC was not a neutral arbiter and that it continually took Zanu PF's side, even as it blatantly flouted the provisions of the power sharing agreement.

Baba Jukwa's Banda conspiracy theory sparked substantial outrage on his page. The comments below his post ranged from measured rebukes of the Malawian President which appealed to ideas of morality and Pan-African solidarity, to angry attacks characterized by vulgarity, sexism and xenophobia. In the days that followed, Zimbabweans, egged on by Baba Jukwa, dispensed with diplomatic etiquette and posted their messages of protest on the Banda's official Facebook page. In an attempt to stop the deluge, the posting function on the page was disabled. Not to be outdone, indignant Zimbabweans resorted to writing in the comments section below Banda's posts, and sending messages to her inbox. Others voiced their objections on the Facebook page of a prominent newspaper, *The Malawi Voice*.

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Such was the volume of messages that President Banda was forced to respond emphatically: "My friends from Zimbabwe let me tell you that I am categorically focussed on the welfare of my brothers and sisters here in Malawi. Please stop spreading false rumours based on hearsay. If you have heard anything, ask than coming here to vent your anger on people who are not part of whatever you are guessing. We will not talk about this again. Good day!" In this case again we see the ambivalent nature of the discursive practices within the public. On the one hand it represented efforts by the citizens to speak the truth to power in a range of registers, many of which did not conform to diplomatic etiquette. In addition, social media was used creatively in order to gain the attention of an international leader who would normally be out of reach to ordinary citizens. On the other, directing a torrent of venom at a foreign leader on the basis of an unverified rumour, was not necessarily the most constructive way of making use of the opportunity. In addition, the use of hate speech in a number of these comments was deeply problematic.

Conclusion

The unruly public convoked by Baba Jukwa through Facebook provides a valuable window on to vast collection popular perceptions and debates about Zimbabwean politics which would have been otherwise difficult to access. However, in order to fully grasp the significance of this public, we need to move away from normative conceptions of the public sphere, and instead focus our critical reflections on 'actually existing publics'. By doing this, I have uncovered a rich discursive sphere in which citizens debated and tried to make sense of the country's troubled politics. Among the notable features of the public were, firstly, the use of symbolically laden

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pseudonyms which drew on a diverse range of sources from political history to popular culture. The second was the use of multiple registers in deliberation, which include reasoned argument, diatribe, the expression of religious sentiment, and a carnivalesque mode of expression. The last was the preoccupation with conspiracy theory. All three features of the deliberations helped to constitute the vernacular discourse that emerged within the public. What emerges from the analysis of the interactions on Baba Jukwa's page is the fact they represented a creative fusion of the old and the new. This is clear in the ways that older forms of political self-representation, such as the Chimurenga names of the 1960s and 1970s, were resurrected and repurposed on Facebook. In addition, older communicative practices that have long been a feature of Zimbabwe's political culture, such as conspiracy theorizing, found their way onto this digital platform. Ultimately, the public's significance in fostering democratic politics in Zimbabwe remains ambiguous. On the one hand, it served as a space where critiques of the state could be articulated, at a time when dissent was being aggressively policed. On the other, the descent into hate speech and the preoccupation with conspiracy theorizing ultimately undermined the efforts to challenge Zanu PF's hegemony.

Notes

[1] Moyo, "Repression, Propaganda"; Manganga, "The internet".
[2] Peel, "Exile and the Internet"; Mano and Willems, "Debating "Zimbabweanness"; Moyo, "Repression, Propaganda"; Manganga, "The internet"; Alexander and McGregor, "Representing Violence".
[3] Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*.
[4] Alexander and McGregor, "Representing Violence", Mano and Willems, "Debating "Zimbabweanness".
[5] Mutsvairo and Sirks, "Examining the Contribution".
[6] Mujere and Mwatwara, "Citizen Journalism".
[7] Mare, "Baba Jukwa".

[8] Goode *et al*, "Unruly Publics".

[9] Zayani, *Networked Publics*; Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*; Boyd, "Social Sites"; and Goode *et al*, "Unruly Publics".

[10] Dean, "Why the Net".

[11] Hess, "Resistance Up in Smoke", 429-30.

[12] Mouffe, "Which Public Sphere", 58.

[13] *Ibid*, 63.

[14] Gardiner, "Wild Publics"; Goode *et al*, "Unruly Publics".

[15] Gardiner, "Wild Publics", 38.

[16] The repressive laws that were passed include the Broadcasting Services Act of 2001, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act of 2002, the Public Order and Security Act of 2002, and the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act of 2004.

[17] Moyo, "Repression, Propaganda".

[18] Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires*.

[19] See Alexander Rödlach, *Witches, Westerners, and HIV* and Isak Niehaus, 'Dr. Wouter Basson, Americans, and Wild Beasts'.

[20] Waters, "Conspiracy Theories"; Turner, "Under the Gaze".

[21] Silverstein, "An Excess of Truth", 646.

[22] Turner, 'Under the Gaze'.

[23] *Ibid*, 664.

[24] *Ibid*, 665.

[25] *The Herald*, 15 June 2015, https://www.herald.co.zw/relief-for-baba-jukwa-suspects/, retrieved 17 May 2018.

[26] Amai is the Shona word for mother, and baba is the word for father.

[27] Hess, "Resistance up in smoke", 427.

[28] Newell, *The Power to Name*.

[29] Ibid, 16.

[30] Pfukwa, "Onomastic Innovation".

[31] Raftopolous, "The Crisis in Zimbabwe". 214.

[32] Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics", 55.

[33] Fontein, "Anticipating the Tsunami", 388. See also Mbembe, *On the Post Colony*.

[34] Report of the Portfolio Committee on Mines.

[35] See *The Standard,* 28 April 2013

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      Press and Internet Debates." In *The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and*

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