ORIGINAL PAPER

Birds and Bees, the 'R' Word and Zuma's p*nis: Censorship Avoidance Strategies in a South African Online Newspaper's Comments Section

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Abstract

Although linguistic practices in online platforms continue to receive fair scholarly attention, limited research has been conducted on online censorship avoidance strategies in South Africa about online newspapers. We use notions of semiotic remediation on comments on two articles on a nude painting of former South African President Jacob Zuma in a popular South African online publication, SowetanLive, to show how the commentators creatively avoid censorship and to operationalise their right of freedom of expression. Particularly, we show the various ways commentators transform and recontexatualise existing semiotic affordances of punctuation marks, letters, digits, South African English, indigenous South African languages and cultural knowledge to achieve new and extended meanings while simultaneously avoiding censorship. This paper demonstrates that censorship strategies are mostly employed to comments related to: (1) racism; (2) gender identities and (3) sex. As extensive as these censorship strategies are, the potential inflammatory content is intentionally made to be decipherable by participants which problematises the concept of 'censorship'. This paper argues that South Africa is to a large extent still a conservative country that grabbles with socio-political issues such as racism, gender identities, objectification of black bodies and so forth. However the readership of SowetanLive is finding ways to question such conservatism through online platforms and censorship avoidance strategies.

Keywords Online newspaper comments · Censorship avoidance · Brett Murray · Sex · Racism · SowetanLive · Jacob Zuma

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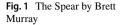
Introduction

South Africa's Constitution is hailed as one of the most progressive in the world particularly the Bill of Rights in Chapter 2. The chapter's interlude elaborates that "this Bill of Rights is a cornerstone of democracy in South Africa. It enshrines the rights of all people in our country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom". Of particular interest to this paper is the right to freedom of expression tabled as section 16 of this chapter. This section elaborates that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes

(a) Freedom of the press and other media;
(b) Freedom to receive or impart information or ideas;
(c) Freedom of artistic creativity; and
(d) Academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.

Enabling readers to comment on online newspaper articles can be conceptualised as a manner of operationalising freedom of expression. South Africans and particularly SowetanLive readers in this instance are aware of their right to freely express themselves as evident by this reprimanding comment from a participant: *"leave the kid alone, she is practising her "freedom of speech" just like you are. This is public forum and she can say whatever she wants to say, viva freedom of speech viva".* However this right is not unlimited. According to Section 16 of Chapter 2, the right to freedom of expression does not extend to: (a) propaganda for war; (b) incitement of imminent violence; or (c) advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm. Although freedom of expression is a constitutional right, the South African society is a relatively conservative one and frowns upon the open discussion of certain topics such as sex, racism and sexual orientation. The exhibition of *the Spear*—the penis-exposing painting of former black male president, Jacob Zuma by Brett Murray, a white male implicitly contained and evoked the perfect combination of South Africa taboo topics—topics that South Africans were keen to comment on but had to do so in a discreet manner in order to avoid censorship and societal judgement as it were. Drawing on comments from two online newspaper articles from the online newspaper, SowetanLive, this paper explores the linguistic strategies used by the commentators to conceal comments that are of an inflammatory nature. These censorship avoidance strategies include the use of random syllablification, the repurposing of punctuation marks and the use of South African multilingual and multicultural slang. This paper illustrates how events like the exhibition of the Spear that cause a national frenzy expose 'authentic' South Africa and provide us with a rare opportunity to witness the raw and non-pretentious rainbow nation. On a symbolic level, the Spear did not only expose Zuma private/hidden affairs—it exposed the socio-cultural perspectives of South Africans. The paper is divided into five sections: The initial section discusses the context of the study which includes an overview of Sowetan and SowetanLive, SowetanLive's guidelines for commenting and the two online newspapers articles from which the study's data was sourced. The second section gives a summary of

Fig. 1 The Spear by Brett Murray

the conceptual frameworks the paper draws on and the respective research methodology. The third section discusses the study's findings and the concluding section contains the concluding remarks (Fig. 1).

Sowetan and SowetanLive

The Sowetan is a South African daily newspaper that is published in English. It takes the format of a tabloid and it is aimed at an English literate Black readership. It was established in 1981 as a liberation struggle newspaper and filled the void left by the Post, which was deregistered by the apartheid government. Initially, the Sowetan was a weekly free sheet which was distributed in the Soweto Township of South Africa. According to Hadland et al. (2008: 172):

> the Sowetan styled itself as a paper that articulated the opinions of the Black intelligentsia, as it was both psychologically and politically necessary, implicitly or explicitly, to rebut the White supremacist idea of blacks as stupid primitives, and one way of doing this was to engage at the level of ideas.

According to the Centre for Civil Society (2014), Sowetan was a struggle newspaper in its early days and it represented the lives and viewpoints of Black people under the yoke of apartheid. In this vein, the Sowetan, the oppressed people as well as the struggle were seen to be as one. It is in light of this that the Sowetan was a unique paper (Centre for Civil Society, 2014)—anyone who wanted an understanding of what Black people thought or were doing had to read The Sowetan. In addition, following the elections in 1994 and the achievement of political freedom

accompanied by the 'improvement' of the lives of Black people, the Sowetan managed to adapt to this current scenario and the content of the newspaper was equally improved in order to match the aspirations of the people in the new South Africa (Centre for Civil Society 2014).

SowetanLive, the digital home of Sowetan was launched in July 2010 (Sowetan Live Rate Card 2011). The majority of SowetanLive readers are male, standing at 61% and majority of these readers are aged between 25 and 34 years old. In terms of academic qualifications, 58% of the readers have a diploma, university degree or a postgraduate qualification; 58% of Sowetan Live readers speak Zulu, Sepedi, Setswana, Sesotho, Xhosa, Xitshonga, Tshivhenda and Ndebele as a first language. With regard to demographics, 73.44% of SowetanLive readers are black, 19.98% are white, 4.76% are coloured and 1.82% are Indian (Sowetan Live Rate Card, 2011).As a publication that was borne out of apartheid and continues to exist in post-apartheid apartheid, Sowetan and subsequently SowetanLive serves as an ideal platform to analyse the socio-political and cultural perceptions of the South African youth as the readership is predominantly representative of the country's demographics.

"ANC Takes Battle of The Spear to Court" and "Will Zuma's Spear Stay Up"

The two newspaper articles, *"ANC*[1] *takes battle of The Spear to court"* and *"Will Zuma's Spear stay up"* were published on SowetanLive on 21 May 2012 and 22 May 2-12, respectively. In May 2012, Brett Murray, a white Cape Town-based South African artist, displayed a painting dubbed *The Spear* at Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. This artwork depicts then South African President Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed. It is understood to be a remediation of the Victor Ivanov poster *Lenin Lived, Lenin is Alive, Lenin Will Live.*[2] Murray was not the first artist to depict Zuma is in a sexually explicit manner—Ayanda Mabulu, a black South African artist is renowned for producing sexually provocative art of Zuma and other political leaders such as Nelson Mandela. On the 22nd of May 2012, the Spear was defaced.

The painting was defaced by a taxi driver, Louis Mabokela and a white businessman, Barend le Grange. According to Bauer (2012), le Grange admitted to painting a red X over the genital and facial area of the art piece and claims that his act of defacing the painting symbolised a spoilt ballot paper—"The first X was against ANC-led government who I believe are going the wrong direction and the second X was against people making a mockery of our president". Le Grange claims the painting was causing unnecessary racial tensions which could result in civil war (Knoetze and Maphumulo, 2012) and based on his concern for 'the people', he decided to deface the painting. Mabokela smeared the surface of the painting with black paint ensuring that Zuma's face and genitals are hidden, figuratively, he hid

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[1] ANC is the abbreviation for African National Congress—the governing political party in South Africa since 1994.

[2] (https://inside-politics.org/2012/05/17/the-painting-of-president-zuma/).

Zuma's scandals and the controversial incidents associated with him. Black being a non-transparent colour, Mabokela figuratively blocked the transparency Murray was hoping to create. Mabokela claims the painting was an insult to Zuma as he is a parent. According to Knoetze and Maphumulo (2012), Mabokela stated that he was proud of smearing the artwork with paint and "felt free because the president is covered already".

Going on just the justifications for defacing the Spear, it is evident that the overall discourses surrounding this painting are complex, multi-layered and mainly stem from South Africa's history of colonialism and apartheid. It is these discourses surrounding this painting that the study focuses on particularly how commentators intentionally use censorship avoidance strategies in attempt to practice their right to freedom of expression.

SowetanLive's Guidelines for Commenting

SowetanLive just like numerous other online newspapers have a moderation policy in place which is based rules that seek to regulate the type of content posted on the comment section. In line with international practices (Hughey and Daniels 2013); SowetanLive aims to curb unsavoury comments by requiring individuals to register as users before allowing them to post comments on the desired online newspaper articles. According to SowetanLive's Guidelines for Commenting as found on their website under the Join-Up option, members are requested to bear the following in mind while commenting: 1. Comments should be relevant to the article or the thread of conversation. 2. Users should refrain from making personal attacks. 3. Users should not use vulgar, discriminatory, obscene or abusive language. Failure to adhere to these rules might result in the following: A perpetrators' comment may not appear; other users may report the users for abuse and the site administrators may remove the perpetrators' comment (http://www.sowetanlive.co.za/?filter=register). However, considering the censorship avoidance strategies commentators use as revealed in this article, it seems SowentanLive has put in place software that flags certain contributions as unsavoury as per guidelines and automatically blocks them from appearing, or flags them to newspaper adjudicators for further scrutiny. This could explain why commentators avoid, substitute or disguise certain words and phrases, as will be shown in this article.

Semiotic Remediation

Online newspapers are typically spaces where an amalgamation of various semiotic resources occurs typically referred to as multimodality. This amalgamation of these semiotic resources is commonly known as convergence in newspaper circles as newspapers continue to erode the boundaries between print, broadcast and online media (Domingo et al. 2008). There are various methods in place for the analysis of multimodal platforms and this paper draws on semiotic remediation as repurposing.

According to Prior and Hengst (2010, 5) as a field of study, semiotics can be said to be about how general principles and patterns of semiosis are reworked and hence identifiable across modes, codes, and media. The presence of these general principles and patterns are described as due to a process of remediation. Prior and Hengst (2010, 1) explain that 'remediation points to ways that activity is (re)mediated—not mediated anew in each act—through taking up the materials at hand, putting them to present use, and thereby producing altered conditions for future action'. This is in line with Bolter and Grusin (1999, 19) argument: 'the process of remediation makes us aware that all media are at one level a play of signs'. The ideas of 'play of signs' and reusing semiotic material at hand for present use are at the centre of semiotic remediation as repurposing which accounts for "the diverse ways that humans' and nonhumans' semiotic performances (historical or imagined) are represented and reused across modes, media, and chains of activity (Prior and Hengst 2010, 2). The *re-* in remediation and reusing, for example, suggests a focus on dialogic intersemiotic chains linking the present use to previous/past use across media, genres and other contextualisations (Prior 2014; Prior and Hengst 2010).

Online Linguistic Practices

Many terms have been suggested to describe the linguistic practices evident in cyberspace. These include "weblish, netlingo, e-talk, tech-speak, wired-style, geek-speak and netspeak" (Thurlow et al. 2004: 118). Other terms include "netlish, internet language, cyberspeak, electronic discourse, electronic language, interactive written discourse and computer-mediated communication" (Crystal, 2001:17). So far the concept most accepted and used, is netspeak. According to Thurlow et al. (2004), the usefulness of the term 'netspeak' is in its inclusion of both language and discourse—not only do we evaluate how people speak/write on the net but we are interested in what they do with the language, the manner in which language is used for relationship building and ultimately the construction of identities through language.

Irrespective of the umbrella term used to collectively identify online linguistic practices, at ground level, the type of online linguistic practices identified by various theorists are mostly similar. Herring (2012) distinguishes between the type of online linguistic practices according to typography, orthography, morphology and syntax. A brief discussion of the first two categories follows as they are most relevant to this study.

According to Herring (2012: 2), "typography in text-based CMC refers primarily to the use of non-alphabetic keyboard symbols such as numbers, punctuation and special symbols". Additionally, "it includes non-standard capitalisation (including ALL CAPS, lack of initial capitalisation, alternating uPper and lOwEr case and 'camel case') as well as emoticons or sequences of keyboard characters that prototypically imitate facial expressions" such as :) for a smile (Herring 2012: 2). Other typographic features of CMC include repeated punctuation, substitution of numbers or letters for words or parts of words and leetspeak (some or all letters of a word being replaced by non-alphabetic symbols based on graphic resemblance), for instance sex for sex.

In terms of orthography, Herring (2012: 2) argues that nonstandard orthography is typically perceived as the defining characteristic of computer-mediated language as e-communication often demonstrates spelling practices indicative of loosened orthographic norms. Herring (2012: 2) states that there is a noticeable overlap between nonstandard typography and nonstandard orthography in CMC and the two often co-occur. "Nonstandard orthography includes abbreviation (acronyms, clippings, vowel omissions (pls instead of please); phonetically-motivated letter substitutions; and spellings that imitate casual or dialectal pronunciations; eye dialect and spellings that represent prosody or nonlinguistic sounds such as laughter" (Herring 2012: 3).

Thurlow et al. (2004: 125) state the following as the most common typographic strategies used in netspeak: letter homophones; acronyms; creative use of punctuation; capitalisation or other symbols for emphasis and stress; onomatopoeic and/or stylised spellings; keyboard-generated emoticons or smileys; direct requests, interactional indicators and coloured text and emotes.

As is evident above, netspeak and its respective characteristics is not novel—these are observable throughout different web-based platforms. However as well-known as these netspeak characteristics are, it is evident that computerised censorship programmes are slacking in their recognition of netspeak specifically content of an inflammatory nature. This paper to an extent illustrates commentators' creativity in their constant remediation of linguistic features in a bid to avoid online censorship.

Commenting as an Interactive Feature

The role and scope of the media particularly journalism continues to be a heavily contested topic. Traditionally, journalism revolved around journalists as the gatekeepers—they were 'responsible' for the production of news and it was up to them which news to publish or not (Domingo et al. 2008). However, the introduction of the Internet challenged the newspaper firstly, as an old-fashioned medium and secondly, as a central source of news has been challenged. According to Domingo et al. (2008) traditional journalism was faced with the task of lessening the distance between news-producers and their audiences and making news more conversational. The introduction of Web 2.0 applications and interactive technologies opened up new ways for newspapers to 'exploit new technologies to reinvigorate journalism and address contemporary needs' (Manosevitch and Walker 2009, 3). One of these interactive technologies and the most common form of participation in contemporary news use is the comment section (Weber 2014). As was noted by the World Editors' Forum in its seminal report published in September 2013, Online Comment Moderation: Emerging Best Practices, 'online comments have become an essential ingredient of a thriving news publication: readers feel that they have a right to make their contribution in an online environment that is becoming increasingly more dialogue based than one–way broadcasting'.

Recently though, online commentary sections have been heavily criticized for the quality of their comments especially due to the supposed oversaturation of

hate-speech in comment sections. To this end, Hughey and Daniels (2013) state that an increased amount of online newspapers in the US have disenabled their comment feature. Even in South Africa, in 2015, two major newspapers namely News24 and Independent News Online (IOL) permanently closed down their comment section. In justifying their decision, News24 reported that although interesting contributions were made, they were overshadowed by spats, racism, sexism, and bigotry. Similarly, IOL stated the decision was made as a measure to fight abuse on their comment section. Numerous scholars have conducted research on online comment section. However, most of the work to date demonises this interactive feature further. Research related to news web sites' comments section include Hate Speech (Erjavec and Kovacic 2012); Racism (Hughey and Daniels 2013); 'Race Trouble' (Cresswell et al. 2014), Incivility (Coe et al. 2014) and the enhancement of quality in online news comments (Diakopoulos and Naaman 2011).

Not all newspapers have removed from their online arm the readers' comment section, including the newspaper from which the data was collected—SowetanLive. Instead, various online newspapers have adopted various strategies to deal with offensive comments including no longer allowing anonymous online comments, compulsory registration and some form of identity verification, stricter and more aggressive comment moderation policies (Hughey and Daniels 2013, 335). The SowetanLive appears have adopted these measures as seen from their guidelines outlined above, and yet as this article will show, commentators still manage to send through 'offensive' messages. As far as we are aware no study has been done on how commentators use multilingual and multicultural discourses and competences thereof to avoid censorship.

Methodology

The data for this article was collected from the comments section on SowetanLive of the two articles, that is, *"ANC takes battle of The Spear to court"* and *"Will Zuma's spear stay up"*. For this study, 64 pages (from both articles) of screenshots with approximately five comments each were downloaded. The downloaded screenshot comments were pasted on two Microsoft Word documents—Text 1 (comments from "ANC takes battle of *The Spear* to court") and Text 2 (comments from "Will Zuma's *spear* stay up?"). The data corpus (entire data collected for this study) was 1358 comments with each comment serving as a data item. The fact that two articles could generate such a huge amount of comments sparked interest and motivated the researchers to use these articles.

The data from the two articles were collected from 21 to 22 May 2012 as these dates are significant in the extremely short 'existence' of *The Spear*: On 21 May 2012, the ANC announced their decision about approaching the High Court for an interdict against the Goodman Gallery and City Press print newspaper—prior to this date there existed only threats. 22 May 2012 is significant as it marks the day *The Spear* was defaced by a disgruntled Zuma supporter, which led to the picture being removed from display, and the ANC withdrawing the case. By this date, commentators' attention had also started drifting away from the saga surrounding the Spear as

exemplified by these comments: (a) *"Are you people still discussing Zooma's penis? *yawns*…fuel price might decrease, now that's something to discuss"* and b) *"So the fight of the penis continues *sigh*. Not LONG…This topic's comments will come to abrupt end…in a very short space of time"*.

The type of comments which contain the most censorship avoidance strategies belong to three main topics: Race/Racism, Sexuality and/Gender and Sex.

Racism with Many Full Stops

Banda (2016) in his analysis of online newspapers' comments sections in Africa, argues that one way of avoiding censorship is through the creation of random syllables. It is called random syllabification because a commentator does not follow any particular rules for breaking the words.

Participants draw on their knowledge of linguistic and word formation rules as a semiotic resource and repurpose this knowledge differently by 'inventing' new ways of creating syllables. Additionally, instead of using the conventional hyphen to break words into syllables, users use a full stop (.). Typically, a full stop is used to indicate the end of a sentence. However, in this case, participants use it to 'break' up taboo words or words that will invite censorship. By inserting a full stop in a word, participants the commentators are trying to deceive automatic blocking software not to detect the 'taboo'. Banda (2016) also found the breaking of words into syllables with full stops/and/or slashes as a typical censorship avoidance strategy employed by users in online newspapers comments. This study corroborates Banda's (2016) conclusion that the use of full stops for random syllabification is a common censorship strategy. In the case of this study as illustrated by extracts 1–8, random syllabification is primarily used to camouflage words that can be associated with racism and/or racial prejudices.

Extract 1 Initial comment: "I have a dream, that one day Africa will be free of "whi. te European Aliens". That one day these whi_te "things" will see the need to go back to their forefathers land live Africa with Africans"

Response to comment: Sounds more like a nightmare. You will have no garden to work if all wh.ites are gone.

Extract 2 *The main problem in this country is White people and their racism.*

To a certain extent, Murray decision to paint and exhibit an art piece with Zuma's genitals exposed was interpreted as being racist and brought into question our supposed Rainbow Nation. In extract 1–4, it is observable how racist remarks are made against an entire race group based on the behaviour of either Zuma (black male) or Murray (white male).

In extract 1, it is observable how the initial commentator repurposes the famous speech "I have a dream" by Martin Luther King and reworks the words to serve this context. There is also a use of full stops to break the word 'white (s) into syllables

that would typically be undetectable by censorship computer software. Both the comment and response can be considered to be racist—the commentator (whom we can assume is non-white) refers to white people as Europeans aliens and things that have no place in Africa. The response rebuttals that Africa without whites would be a disaster as non-whites would be unemployed implying that non-whites in Africa live to serve and work for whites.

Extract 2 contains no censorship avoidance strategy—the commentators bites the bullet and unapologetically states that South Africa's main problem is White people and their racism insinuating that white people own racism i.e. all whites in South Africa are portrayed to be 'inherently' racist.

Extract 3 "Big di.k with little emducat.ions get the top job. Great advert for affirmative action though".

Extract 4 Initial comment: That painting says: we black _ people are stupid, the only thing that have advantage on over white people is big penises.

Response: "what does a picture of 1 s.ex.ual reckless elder has to do with all blac.k people???

Extract 3 and 4 are also racist utterances that target blacks but unlike extracts 1 and 2, these utterances is related to blacks, their size of their penises and their intellectual and/or professional capabilities. In extract 3, there is 'black versus black' disagreement about the symbolic meaning of this painting for blacks. The response hints that Zuma does not qualify to be used a standard to judge black people moral and intellectual standards. In extract 4 the commentator implies that affirmative action primarily involves hiring people like Zuma (black and marginalised) that have inadequate qualifications but own a big penis.

Although flawed, the association between a black man's big penis size and intellectual capabilities in extract 3 and 4 is not arbitrary. According to Saint-Aubin (2002), from their initial contact with dark-skinned people, Europeans have always been preoccupied about the sexuality of black men, more specifically the size of their penises. By assuming that Zuma's penis is large and thick and portraying it as such without actual 'proof 'of how Zuma's penis looks, Murray draws on what is known as the 'Mandingo theory'[3]—the assumption that all black men have big penises and are very fertile with a high libido. Therefore, regardless of the status a black man holds—slave or president of a country—he is still enslaved by his 'natural' obsession for sex and ultimately is mainly good for sex and producing offspring, something Zuma has not failed in doing. Murray's construction of Zuma is consistent with the nineteenth century scientists' construction of black men as a slave to his sexual urges (Saint-Aubin 2002).

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[3] In the 1975 film titled 'Mandingo', an African male slave, Mede from Mandingo, was bought for fighting other slaves and breed chattel, as according to the film, a Mandingo was considered the most suitable for these purposes (Shimizu 1999). Besides being a sex slave, Mede's plantation master's wife manipulated him into having sex with her, an act which ultimately resulted in his gruesome murder.

Extract 5 'your BIG b.la.k mouth tendencies at it again'.

It seems the case that racist discourse would have lexemes 'black' and 'white', and the automatic detection software would flag their presence in discourse as requiring further scrutiny by the authorities before being projected to the public/ readership. In the extract below, the word 'black' has been misspelled, and further broken up using full stops in double disguise.

In the example above, the word "black" is broken into syllables and simultaneously 'misspelled' to enhance the avoidance of censorship. Black as a racial category in South Africa strongly resonates with the former segregationist, Apartheid government. Due to the controversial and delicate nature of race and racial categories in South Africa, the use of race-related terms would be closely monitored through blocking software. Consequently, by breaking up the word into syllables and omitting the 'c', enables the user to label her/his interlocutor as black without being blocked.

Extract 6 'Hello r.a.c.i.s.t wh!te p.i.n.k b1atch...'

The commentators manages to camouflage offensive words to pass through censorship detection. The commentator has added the letter 'a' to further obfuscate the offensive word to avoid detection. The user in extract 6 is aware that words and lexemes related to 'race' and ethnicity are likely to trigger censorship in South Africa. The commentator extract 3 repurposes the full stop, exclamation mark (!) and the number (1) to disguise 'racist', 'white', 'pink' and 'bitch.' The commentator is aware that readers (including the target of message) will be able to chronotopically re-connect the intersemiotic chains by refiguring the exclamation mark (!) to represent the letter 'i' and the number 1 to represent the letter 'i' in writing the words 'white' and 'bitch'.

Full stops are used in mainly in three ways in extracts 1–6 to avoid censorship and particularly to attempt and conceal racially offensive comments: (1) randomly inserted in between racial categories such as white and black and (2) randomly placed in offensive words such as sexual and pink and (3) to replace letters in offensive terms such di.k (dick) and b.la.k (black).

Regardless of these attempts at concealing racist attitudes, fellow commentators are able to still decipher the content of racist comments as it evident in the following comments:

Extract 7 "So much racism puke on a Monday morning".

Extract 8 "The ANC has turned this into another wh!te versus black issue...when it's an issue about Zuma as a president's leadership style".

Extract 7 and 8 brings into question the intended use of online censorship avoidance strategies—do commentators draw on these strategies with the hope of concealing the actual content and in so doing hide certain ideologies/attitude or are the

strategies used to escape computer censorship yet still bring a certain point across? The latter would justify why commentators draw on censorship strategies that never completely disrupts the spelling of controversial words. Herein also lies the dichotomy of offline versus online identities (expecting online users to divorce themselves from their real/everyday/offline identities) and the intense need for online spaces to be political correct.

Who Gets to Imagine What Zuma's Penis Looks Like?

Legally, individuals that self-identify as either lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) or feel comfortable identifying with a combination of gender identities are protected by the South African Constitution—just like all heteronormative South Africans are. However, constitutional legitimisation and protection (e.g. legalisation of same sex marriages) does not warrant that social perceptions and stigma from heteronormative individuals about LGBTQ persons will automatically subside. Globally, homophobia continues to be a reality as evident by the occasional reports of the murder of LGBTQ persons in South Africa and even globally, with the Orlando, Florida shooting in June 2016 at Pulse, a popular homosexual nightclub serving as a disturbing example.

Extracts 9 and 10 below illustrate how a portion of the South African community clings on to heteronormative norms. In the examples below, discriminatory/offensive words that could have attracted detection are recontextualised and camouflaged in symbols and digits.

Extract 9 "Brett Murray is gay. Calling another man's manhood "The Spear" means he envies a 70 year old d!ck that's currently satisfying 5 wives…Whereas gay Murray can't even handle his w!fe's keyh0le…"

The extract above encapsulates the basic premises of heteronormative (masculine) thinking—(1) the biological ownership of penis equates to one being a man; (2) that a man married to a female can only have sexual relations with female and (3) that Murray 'logically' has to be married to a female (even though the commentator dubs him 'gay Murray'). Suggesting that Murray is gay male who envies Zuma's dick yet fails to adequately sexually satisfy his wife also hints at the assumption that homosexual males are promiscuous. In a bid to avoid censorship, the commentator replaces the letter 'i' in the word 'dick' and wife with an exclamation mark and uses the euphemism 'keyh0le' to refer to the vaginal opening. The commentator also repurposes the number '0' to replace the letter 'o' as the word 'hole' itself can be offensive.

Extract 10 'You sound like a gay-stalker. B@lls up to that fag0tt!!!'

The user disguises the word "faggot" by firstly, using the numerical digit "0"to replace the letter "o" in the word. Secondly, there is additional disguise through

misspelling the term as "fagott". Faggot is a derogatory term used to refer to a homosexual male. The user also repurposes the *at* symbo*l* "@" and reuses it for the letter "a" in the word *balls.* However, the phrase "balls up" brings up several contradictory meanings in this context designed to avoid censorship. The phrase could be (mis-)interpreted as celebratory or 'encouraging', both of which masks the word "balls" when interpreted as 'testicles', which would warrant potential censorship.

Extract 11 'I think this Brett guy is gay, y was he imagining the d@#% of the president, ngeke umthole Brett ndini, President is straight".

The extract above contains an instance of recontextualisation of symbols associated with comic strip and cartoon genres (Prior et al. 2006; Prior 2014) to represent an offensive term. The commentator draws on her/his knowledge of comic strips and cartoons and uses it in a different context. Typically, a grawlix only consists of typographic symbols but in this case the user includes the first letter of the obscene word as a hint of the real word. In this extract we also notice the insertion of an isiZulu phrase in the comment 'ngeke umthole Brett ndini' loosely translated as 'Brett, you will never get him' (Zuma).

Another issue related to gender identities and sexual imagination is the public exhibition of bodies particularly black bodies. In extract 12, there is an observation of white people's beginning of age obsession/fascination with black bodies particularly their private parts. Extract 13 suggests that perhaps it is time to turn the table and also put white bodies like that of Helen Zille (former leader of the Democratic Alliance) on show.

Extract 12 'it is a matter of historical fact that Whi.te People have always been fascinated with blac.k peoples private parts. Whi.te people took Sakie Plattie/Bartman to Europe to display her because she had very big hips—they found that fascinating.'

The commentator uses the fullstop to disguise 'white' and 'black' due to the sensitivity of race in South Africa. However, the point being made is that like Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman a slave who was exhibited to entertain Europeans at "freak shows" in London and Paris because of her Khoisan features deemed 'strange' and unusual (Davie 2012), Zuma's body painting was being exhibited for sale. Like slaves used to be exhibited and like Baartman's body and genitalia were exhibited to entertain Europeans and to belittle the Khoisan, Zuma's body and penis (painting) is being exhibited as art and to be sold to the highest bidder.

The commentator takes Murray and white people supporting the exhibition as representing the white oppressors, and Zuma as indexing the oppressed black people. In the process the commentator replaces the letter 'i' with an asterisk in the word 'pinkie', a socially offensive term used to refer to white people in a derogatory manner.

Extract 13 Initial comment: 'This is outrageous, all the p*nkies are justifying this despicable picture. If someone paints a picture of Malema standing with a machine gun over a dead bhunu, will there be an uproar?? Hell yeah, there will".

Response: "nice !dea…s3ll it 0utside the g@llary. One of Helen with a b1111111 g p@ir of s0ccer b.@.l.l.s on displ@y."

Extract 14 Bl@ck artist must also reciprocate, after all its art?

Extracts 13 and 14 call for white bodies to also be put in public display in the same violent, violating and undignified manner Zuma's body was. A suggestion of a white body that should be painted in a very sexually explicit manner (with big, hard breasts) is that of Helen Zille—the former leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA), a political party whose initial aim was to represent the views of ethnic minority groups in South Africa (white, coloured and Indian) out of "fear of being excluded in a country that showed signs of increasing Africanisation" (Southern, 2011:285). Currently, the DA is the official opposition party to the ANC—the ruling party, perceived to mainly represent blacks. Although the DA now claims to represent all racial groups in South Africa, "the majority of its parliamentary representatives and leadership at national level are white and is considered as the party that wants to bring back apartheid"(Southern, 2011:290). Based on this, it comes as no surprise that the participant draws a link between Zille and white people—Murray is white so he must be pro Zille, like it is assumed blacks are pro Zuma. Essentially, the participants in extracts 13 and 14 argue that blacks must strike back (i.e. produce provocative paintings about whites) and call it art when there is an upset as Murray did.

The discussion of the final two censorship avoidance strategies steps away from the English language and explores how users draw on the South African multilingual heritage and everyday linguistic practices. With the examples that follow, we also show how commentators use historical knowledge, memory and cultural materialities as part of an ecological system of semiotic resources used for censorship avoidance.

Localised Words for Private Parts

Although relatively modernised, the South African society is largely culturally conservative. Consequently, open discussions about sex and sexual discourse is often avoided and frowned upon. For example, in 2011, Praekelt Foundation conducted a survey titled SA Youth Sex Survey and found that 60% of South African teenagers would not ask their parents about sex and 44% of those who already participated in sexual intercourse stated they had no information to 'guide' them.[4] Evidently, discussions on sex-related topics particularly between the older and younger

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[4] http://blog.praekeltfoundation.org/post/24131761710/second-youth-sex-survey-shows-sa-youth-between.

generations in South Africa are not popular. Be that as it may be, there is an existing pool of local words drawn by South Africans to discreetly refer to sex and private parts.

Considering the main source of this conversation thread (a painting with Jacob Zuma's genitals exposed), it is understandable how inevitably, private parts would be mentioned in the conversation and potentially flag the contribution for censorship. However, it is to the cultural capital of words and phrases South Africans use to name and describe private parts and taboo topics in a non-offessive and culturally palatable manner that commentators draw on to avoid censorship.

Extract 15 'so what was Ayanda Mabulu's fascination with painting Zuma with his dingus (penis) out? Or is Ayanda really a white man with bootpolish on?'

Ayanda Mabulu is a South African black artist best known for producing paintings that present Zuma in sexually revealing/explicit positions. His work of 2010 titled *Ngcono ihlwempu kunesibhanxa* ('Better rich than a rich puppet') portrayed a naked Zuma with his penis 'held up' by a crutch. In 2012, Mabulu released *Umshini Wam* ('Weapon of Mass Destruction')—a painting of Zuma dancing in traditional Zulu attire while Zuma's genitals are exposed. By mentioning Mabulu, the commentator reminds the audience that Mabulu, a black artist also "had a fascination with Zuma's *dingus* being out (exposed)". Yet there was backlash as experienced by Murray a white artist. In 2010, the situation was the same—Zuma was the president of South Africa and the painting portrayed him in a sexually explicit manner. The only difference between 2010 and 2012 is the skin colour of the artist. By mentioning Mabulu, the commentator draws on historical knowledge to evoke questions of equality and racism.

Dingus is used ordinary Afrikaans to refer to a 'thing' and is equivalent to the English saying "thingie ma bob". In many instances, *dingus* is also used as a replacement word for either a word that one has forgotten or something one does not want to mention explicitly for socio-cultural sanctions associated with its use. The use of the word enables the commentator to pretend s/he has forgotten the word for 'penis', and thus forces the readers through shared cultural knowledge to imagine or provide one. Simultaneously, it enables the commentator to avoid socio-cultural taboo at society level and online censorship had the word 'penis' been used.

Interestingly, in self-censorship, SowetanLive inserted into the article a censor bar in an attempt to cover the genitals. This did not go unnoticed as some commentators saw the irony behind such a feeble attempt, as readers could still make out what was behind censor bar. Consider extract 16.

Extract 16 '@ Sowetan…but I can see the 4 5 on this pic'

The term "4 5" is a South African euphemism for penis. The repurposing and transformation of the numbers '4 5' into a 'word' to mean 'penis' instead of the over-automatised categorisation of them as numerical letters serves a yet another example of how SowetanLive commentators draw on defamiliarisation as not only a

censorship avoidance strategy but also a way to enhance the affordances of cultural objects and knowledge in the sense of semiotic remediation and extension of associated meaning (Banda and Jimaima 2015).

Similarly, in the extract below, the word *gongoloza* is used to replace the English word, 'penis.' Additionally, the extract brings forth a very culturally sensitive topic in South Africa, namely circumcision. To decipher the hidden meanings, one requires knowledge of the South African cultural contexts in which the words and the conversation takes place. Men regardless of age are perceived as 'boys' by those who had been circumcised even when the latter are much younger than the former. Those circumcised in the traditional 'bush' camps disparage those that were circumcised in hospitals as not having done it the proper way, and hence, are still not more than 'boys.' However, although in South Africa, traditional circumcision is considered a compulsory rite of passage from boyhood to manhood for some groups such as the Xhosa and Sotho, it is not for the Zulu, Zuma's ethnic group. It was permanently banned by then Zulu king, Shaka Zulu. In 2010 during an interview with the New York Times, Zuma says that he underwent circumcision "some time back".[5] Since traditional circumcision is not practised among Zulus, it is not clear whether Zuma underwent medical circumcision or 'traditional' circumcision with the Xhosa, Sotho or other ethnic groups that do the practice. All these issues are implicated in extract 17.

Extract 17 Initial comment*: 'Those who saw the picture is the pen*s circumcised or not? But I doubt he is a zuuulu'*
Response: 'I've seen it. They gave him a big circumcised gongoloza'

Considering the context given above, commentator 1 is effectively asking whether the picture depicts Zuma as a 'man' or a 'boy'. The line 'I doubt that he is a zuulu' appears out of place considering the other comments around it, but it is not. These commentators are using their knowledge of Zulu culture, which does not practice traditional circumcision in relation to the Xhosa and the Sotho ethnic groups, for example, who do, to fill in the gaps. The issue being discussed is that if Zuma is circumcised then he is not a Zulu. This appears designed to denigrate Zuma, who at every opportunity likes proclaiming his Zulu ethnic heritage. However, if he is circumcised as commentator 2 confirms, then it was through a medical procedure, and not through traditional practice. Thus rather than earning the rite to manhood, 'they gave [it to] him.' As noted above, medical circumcision is considered inferior to traditional circumcision. One of the reasons is that traditional circumcision includes 'teaching' and guiding initiates on how men behave where the former simply involves having one's foreskin removed at an authorised medical facility. Consequently, individuals who undergo medical circumcision are considered by traditional circumcised males as not being 'real' men.

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[5] http://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/zuma-admits-to-getting-the-chop-484132.

Using African Languages to Avoid Censorship

The AI algorithm/software used by SowetanLive did not seem to detect taboo words and offensive phrases written in African languages. Users took advantage of this and strategically wrote sexually explicit/sensitive content in a local language or used local idioms/sayings to 'hide' the said content. Below follows some examples.

The term "nnyo" as used in extract 18 below is a very rude and ratchet way to refer to a vagina. In fact, the term "nnyo" is also used as a swear word—an incredibly distasteful swear word, as most Bantu languages it also denotes a space for excrement or discharge of (unwanted) waste. It is almost equivalent to the Afrikaans word, *poes* or English 'pussy'. Consequently, although considered a replacement for the term vagina, semantically and symbolically, in the local language practice and meaning making, "nnyo" and vagina are on different levels, with the former used to denote negativity and venom in insults.

Extract 18 'Zuma o rata Nnyo go feta anything in this world' (Zuma loves 'pussy' more than anything else in this world).

A *nnyo* in this case can be considered a dirty, worthless object. In stating that Zuma loves *nnyo*, the user associates Zuma with filth and lust due to his extensive love for *nnyo*. The claim of Zuma's extensive love for 'pussy' is linkable to Zuma's practice of polygamy—Zuma had at the time four wives although he had been married six times already and had 22 children.[6]

There were examples of commentators using sayings in African languages.

Extract 19 'Zoomer is the face of the country and he need to behave like one. Ba mo tswere ditswaro'.

The Setswana saying expressed in the second sentence in extract 19 translates to 'holding someone by their testicles/balls.' Symbolically, it signifies having a strong hold over a man—a man's penis and private parts are a symbol of his 'manhood' therefore having a strong grip on his testicles means being in control of his 'manhood'. Contextually, it implies that by publishing the painting, Murray has Zuma by the balls. Murray 'hit' Zuma where it hurts the most—a sensitive area (as testicles are known to be sensitive too) which is Zuma's irresponsible, risky public sex life. Consider also the following example.

Extract 20 Initial comment: 'Zuma loves sex finish and klaar. Ask Sonono and Kwezi. I don't know what bu Mthembu, Manamela, Blade see in him'
Response*:* 'Maybe o ba ja matanyola'

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[6] http://www.timeslive.co.za/local/2016/05/26/Get-to-know-President-Jacob-Zumas-children.

The response in extract 20 is an attempt to justify why the three ANC-affiliated individuals namely Mthembu, Manamela and Blade continue to shield Zuma. According to Epprecht (2013) the word 'matanyola' is a hybridised Zulu/Sotho word that refers to male-to-male sex and/or male prostitution. The insertion of matanyola in a response that attempts to shed light on the three gentlemen's unwithering support implies that the commentator assumes that they support Zuma because they are his sexual partners. Both the initial extract and response imply a vote of no-confidence in Zuma's leadership as neither commentators consider it plausible that anyone could support Zuma unless it is 'beneficial' in some way or the other.

In extract 21, it is observable how the user draws on her knowledge of the mating practices of animals in an analogy against Zuma.

Extract 21 'O kare nkabe ba mo dirile le mosela' ('They should have made him a tail')

'Zuma is a womaniser—that painting is exactly what he is. They should have also put tail on his @ss". How does a president marry 4 wives and have kids out of wedlock…what about AIDS, Shame on him!'

Both the comments are written by the same user. The first one written is in Setswana which translates to 'They should have made him a tail' with the second comment elaborating on the user's 'justification' for her suggestion for adding a tail on Zuma in the Spear. This suggestion illustrates that the commentator considers Zuma an animal as only animals have tails. The commentator's animalistic perspective of Zuma is motivated by his apparent 'promiscuous' practices of having children outside marriage when he already has 4 wives. The animal world is known to have multiple mating systems which includes polygyny, polyandry and promiscuity.[7] Zuma's participation in more than one mating strategies i.e. wives (polygyny) and mistresses (promiscuity) equates him to being an animal according to the commentator.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper we illustrated the ways in which commentators appropriated multilingual, multicultural and multimodal semiotic resources to comment on racial issues, sex (particularly Zuma's penis) and gender stereotypes in order to circumvent sociocultural taboos and online censorship simultaneously. The ways that commentators achieved their goal of avoding censorship included the random syllabification and/or deliberate misspelling of words, appropriation and remediation and repurposing of symbols, numbers and letters, use of South African multilingual heritage and everyday linguistic practices including use of idioms, euphemism and sayings. In the process commentators extended the meaning potential of these semiotic resources and the purposes to which they are used.

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[7] https://www.nature.com/scitable/knowledge/library/mating-systems-in-sexual-animals-83033427.

The defamiliarisation of the familiar semiotic material allowed for the imagination of alternative uses of these semiotic resources.

What is striking is that in as much as participants strived to defamiliarise taboo words and phrases (by using the abovementioned censorship avoidance strategies), they also needed to ensure that consumers/readers are able to recognise a particular sign or symbol as a representation of the camouflaged content. Commentators thus rely on the fact that consumers will recognize the disguised words as reworkings of prior words or signs they are already familiar. Linguistic and cultural knowledge is critical for the commentator to be able to disguise the words and signs, and at the same time ensure that consumers will be able to make out what they really are and understand the intended messages. Thus, the use of multilingual and multicultural censorship avoidance strategies is not arbitrary. Commentators purposefully manipulated symbols (including letters and numbers), words and topics in contexts of linguistic diversity and ethnic and racial tensions in which interactions occur. Participants ability to circumvent electronic/computer censorship yet ensure that the content is decipherable by fellow readers brings into question the intention of online censorship programmes such as the one used by SowetanLive—is the intention to: (1) create a platform which promotes interactive journalism by increasing readers' participation, (2) ensure that the comments section is a safe and non-intimidating space for readers who wish to engage with the newspaper's content or (3) keep the online space free of any racist and sexist spew and maintain the perception of an inclusive, reconciled South Africa? If we imagine their intention to be a blend of the three suggestions listed above, then we put forth that computerised censorship only is not the most accurate solution. This study contains interesting examples of counterspeech (participants responding to racist, ethnocentrism, sexist etc.) comments and challenging the perspective put forth by a fellow commentator. Exploring the discursive and symbolic advantages of counterspeech coupled with existing computerised censorship might promote more open dialogue about issues that continue to plague the online and offline South African society.

We argued that instances such as the exhibition of the Spear which stir up emotions and triggers memories related to colonialism and apartheid exposes the extent to which South African continues to be a racially divided country and not the commercialised, rainbow nation the rest of the world believes it is. Although the Spear is of a sexual nature, discourse about sex and sexuality still had to be censored which implies that certain topics are still considered taboo in South Africa and not up for 'uncensored' discussions.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval The article is based on information gathered from an online newspaper which is deemed a public space therefore no informed consent was required. No real names were used in this article as all the participants have online usernames.

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