

CITIZEN JOURNALISM AND MORAL PANICS: A CONSIDERATION OF ETHICS IN THE 2015 SOUTH AFRICAN XENOPHOBIC ATTACKS.

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ABSTRACT

This article hinges on empirical qualitative data gathered from an illustrative sample to determine perceptions on enforcing ethics on social media from people who acted as citizen journalists during South Africa's 2015 xenophobic attacks on foreign nationals. The April 2015 attacks were mediated through user-driven social media platforms such as WhatsApp, where truthful and untruthful information on xenophobia was disseminated to warn targeted recipients of impending attacks to allow them to take precautionary measures. While these messages proliferated valid and verified information there were cases where false information was spread, causing undue panic in some sectors of the immigrant society especially. This study therefore uses moral panics and citizen journalism concepts to explore the understanding of ethical implications in mediating the attacks from the perspective of citizen journalism. In the end, the argument is made that professional journalism ethics, according to the respondents in this study, need not apply to social media. Instead, the study concludes, there is a possibility of peer-to-peer monitoring and reprisals that may work as control measures in social media and citizen journalism, especially in times of crisis.

Keywords: citizen journalism; moral panics; peer-to-peer monitoring; professional journalism ethics; xenophobic attacks

INTRODUCTION

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During the April 2015 xenophobic attacks in South Africa, the user-driven social media platform, WhatsApp, became a site where information on xenophobia was disseminated. Most precisely, the platform was used to notify foreign nationals of impending attacks, advising them of the times and locations so that they could take precautionary measures. Mainstream electronic and print media seemed not to be helpful in this regard, as they covered the attacks after they had happened, without taking a precautionary slant. However, these media helped bring forth official reactions and voices to the debacle, in an attempt to assure foreign nationals that they would be protected. Everyday people – especially foreign nationals – relied on social media platforms such as WhatsApp among others for information on recent attacks and the next areas that the xenophobes would target. While life-saving information was spread, there were also cases of misinformation which caused undue panic in some sectors of society (see Evans 2015; Nair 2015).

Xenophobic violence and sentiments are not new in South Africa, neither are these likely to end in the foreseeable future, especially considering that the main points of contention for locals remain unaddressed. Some of these problems have arisen due to this country's sociopolitical and economic environment, where mostly poor and marginalised black South Africans have to compete for low-paying jobs and scarce accommodation or shacks with foreigners who are accused of bribing housing officials and or accepting jobs that foreigners usually decline (see Nyamnjoh 2006). What could be new are the ways victims, perpetrators, the government, the media and other African countries (including their governments) negotiate this violence in an increasingly globalising continent. South Africa was plunged into one of the most violent episodes of xenophobia in 2008, which left around 62 people dead, 670 injured and 100 000 displaced from their homes (Neocosmos 2010). Besides, in December 1994, January 1995, September 1998, throughout 2000 and in November 2009, South Africa experienced xenophobic attacks. In 2015 seven people died, several thousands were displaced and almost 4 000 immigrants volunteered to be repatriated to their countries of origin. The government's handling of the crisis was weak, demonstrating a willingness to act decisively only when the interests of South African multinationals, investing in 'Africa', were threatened with violence. To demonstrate its displeasure, Nigeria recalled its ambassador to South Africa. Different tactics were employed by government, including attempts to give the attacks other labels beside 'xenophobia', referring to them as 'Afrophobia' (fear of cultures and people from other African countries) or 'criminal acts'. In addition, corporate South Africa, just like the government, began to react once their interests came under threat.

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Understanding xenophobia has created problems at the levels of political, academic and ordinary people's lived experiences. After releasing the report called *Citizenship, violence and xenophobia in South Africa* in June 2008, the state-funded Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) saw itself as a catalyst for a storm that was brewing between academics John Sharp and Suren Pillay (see also Dodson 2010). This demonstrated the polarised nature of understandings of xenophobia, with Sharp (2008, 3) arguing that it was the result of the 'working of the global economic order', while Pillay (according to Dodson 2010, 10), maintained there was a need for a 'more effective and progressive management of the movements of people in the region' (Pillay 2008, 22).

The April 2015 attacks were allegedly partly ignited by the Zulu King, Goodwill Zwelithini's comments that foreigners had to go back to their home countries as they were changing the face of South Africa with the cheap goods they sell in most cities. Further, he allegedly suggested that the same foreigners were enjoying South Africans' wealth.

This article refers to moral panics and citizen journalism as concepts which can help to explore the spread of information during the 2015 attacks, and the ways in which such information was mediated through social media networks. The authors argue for the importance of social media-enabled citizen journalism in society, and in so doing problematise the issue of professional journalistic ethics. Drawing attention to the ethical use of social media and citizen journalism is an important aspect of information sharing (especially in a context where people are desperate and feel let down by mainstream media). Some critics argue that citizen journalism infringes on ethical considerations pertaining to known forms of journalistic practices. Methodologically, this research relies on a content analysis of xenophobic warning messages and images, and telephonic interviews conducted with 13 participants (a mix of foreign and South African nationals). The initial informants volunteered to be interviewed after the authors had consulted related WhatsApp feeds whose users comprised fellow church-goers, and university or high school alumni. Nine men and four women from diverse socioeconomic spheres were interviewed: bankers, engineers, maids, general labourers, lecturers and students. Snowball and convenience sampling were used, with the initial set of interviewees conveniently selected through WhatsApp groups: many of them who were foreign nationals known to the researchers, in turn recruited other participants. While the interviewees are not a definitive group sample, their responses illustrate the situational impacts of the use of social media to disseminate information during the April 2015 xenophobic attacks. The researchers asked key questions on the role of social media ethics, especially considering the

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misinformation which is spread in a time of crisis. The article adds to arguments proffered by Moyo (2015), in grappling with issues of social media, citizen journalism and ethics.

XENOPHOBIA: A CONTEXT

According to Neocosmos (2010, 1), xenophobia is a 'form of discrimination closely related to racism, and liable to affect anyone or any group which for whatever reason is considered non-indigenous or non-autochthonous'. Harris (2002) groups explanations for xenophobia into three categories or hypotheses: the scapegoat, isolationist and biocultural. Scapegoating (Morris 1998; Tshitereke 1999) as a hypothesis sees foreign nationals being blamed for unrealised expectations; where communities cannot and do not engage with government on matters of poverty, deprivation and social ills they vent their rage on local foreigners. The isolation hypothesis provides the rationale for why the foreigner is chosen as someone onto whom to vent frustration and anger (Morris 1998). Because of South Africa's international isolation during apartheid, its citizens have not come to see the country as part of the larger African continent. Instead, the rest of Africa is seen as unknowable, wild and volatile. The irony lies in the wild hostility and violence with which South Africans have treated people from the rest of the continent. South Africans also show a learned internal intolerance, stemming from the different races having been separated as much as possible through the architecture of apartheid. The biocultural hypothesis holds that xenophobia is perpetrated through markers of difference. With reasoning akin to apartheid-era racial identification processes, black foreigners are singled out according to their facial features, language and cultural factors relating to hairstyle and dress (Minaar and Hough 1996). These hypotheses, however, do not explain why certain black foreigners are targeted while others are not (Harris 2002). Harris describes xenophobia as part of the discourse of new South African nationalism, functioning within South Africa's 'culture of violence' (see Hamber 1997; Hamber and Lewis 1997; Simpson, Mokwena and Segal 1992).

Hostility towards foreign nationals increased in the 1990s when, after the fall of the apartheid regime, South Africa experienced an influx of migrants (Castles and Miller 2009). Inaccurate migration figures (due to illegal migrants) led to the perception amongst many citizens that South Africa was being encroached on by foreigners (Landau 2004; Valji 2003). Scholars have argued that perceived economic threats (manifesting in the common refrain that 'foreigners are taking our jobs') are the 'major drivers of xenophobic tendencies in South Africa' (Hassim, Kupe and Worby 2008; Hossay 1996; Nieftagodien 2008; Tevera 2013, 17). Public discourse is another driver. The news media (Harris 2002) and organs of the state (Vahed

and Desai 2013) have been identified as responsible for deeply ingrained xenophobic attitudes within society. The police and politicians, for example, have been known to treat foreign nationals with contempt (Murray 2003). A 1999 HRC report found that when an identity document (ID) was not produced, police jailed foreign nationals suspected of being illegally in the country. At times IDs were destroyed when produced (HRC 1999). Further, when xenophobic violence swept the country in May 2008, the South African government were unprepared and offered what has been criticised as a denialist response, saying the violence was the work of a few criminal elements (Crush and Ramachandran 2014).

A survey conducted by the Southern African Migration Programme (SAMP) revealed that 90 per cent of South African interviewees believed ‘there are “too many” migrants in the country’ (Crush and Ramachandran 2014). Dubbed ‘*amakwerekwere*’ – people with an unintelligible language (Kersting 2009, 11–12) – and berated for real and perceived criminal activities, foreign nationals have come to be viewed as a hated drain on an already struggling social system. As Steenkamp (2009, 443) notes, ‘despite democratisation and the promises of a better future, the South African “miracle” has not yet dramatically improved the quality of life of many South Africans living in the townships’. This is perhaps largely why as many as 50 per cent of South Africans believe foreign nationals (legal and illegal) should be deported (Crush 2008). Because of increasing hostility toward other Africans, Afrophobia is the term used to describe the type of xenophobia manifesting in South Africa.

CITIZEN JOURNALISM, ETHICS AND MORAL PANICS

Journalism and citizen journalism

Journalism and indeed citizen journalism are slippery concepts to define. Mpofu (2015), De Burgh (2005), Deuze (2005), Conboy (2010); Mabweazara (2010), Hampton and Conboy (2014), De Beer (2004), and Steensen (2011) agreed that journalism lacks coherence as a field of study and as a practice. This could be informed by the fact that journalism has been characterised, since its professionalisation in the 20th century (Deuze 2005) as ‘an outcome and medium of a professional ideology’ (Steensen 2011, 688). Moreover, Mpofu (2015, 87) observes that we live ‘in a world where anyone with an amateur camera or any other camera and internet-enabled mobile phone can take pictures, edit and broadcast the material (via different media platforms online) [and] can practice journalism’. It has thus become important to define journalists through what they do *not* do, rather than what they do. Steensen (2011) and Singer (2006), taking into account the latest trends in journalism practice, state that journalists are now defined by their adherence to different professional cultures. This refers to

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a culture and system of ideas (ideologies) which ‘real’ journalists use in an attempt to keep intruders out and protect their turf. Accordingly, Deuze (2005, 444) suggests that treating journalism as an ideology rather than an art, profession, industry or literary genre, ‘primarily means understanding journalism in terms of how journalists give meaning to their newswork’. Steensen (2011) argues that the sets of ideas that make up the occupational ideology of journalism differ, change over time and are contextual. While Deuze (2005, 445) argues that the practices or professional norms of journalism in Western elective democracies reveal that ‘the characteristics of journalists are largely similar’, the same cannot be said about media systems in the African context, due to a multitude of differences between Western and African media systems. The latter are more influenced by political history, political economy of the media and the largely restrictive environment in which they operate.

In *What is journalism?*, Deuze (2005, 446) suggests five key concepts or myths that are ‘ideal-typical values’ characteristic of professional modern journalism: public service, objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics. Mpofu (2015, 88) states:

[T]hese define ‘real journalism’ and locate power of definition and authenticity in the occupational ideologies and values of journalism in a straight-jacketed manner. But then there is need to critique the extent of this power bestowed upon ‘real’ journalism in relation to ownership, commerce, politics, social pressures and technology ... The myth of public service as a measure of ‘real’ journalism is problematic when it excludes ‘other’ forms of journalism that are not considered mainstream especially coming from those Stuart Allan has called accidental journalists or just citizen witnesses, meaning citizen journalists.

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Many scholars attribute the rise of citizen journalism to advances in new information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Banda 2010; El-Nawawy and Khamis 2013; Goode 2009; Mabweazara 2013; Mpofu 2015). Controlling technological activities, especially in regards to communication, is frowned upon in most democratic countries, making it difficult for legal systems to control what people send each other as communications for security purposes. This is where the need to define citizen journalism and locate it within the context of ethics and media laws becomes relevant. Before dealing with media ethics, it is important to map an understanding of citizen journalism in the context of this study.

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Normatively, journalists are expected to be news collectors and disseminators as well as watchdogs of society, acting against the excesses of those in power. Citizen journalism is described by some as ‘pseudo’ journalism, as it is ‘caught up in concerns around authenticity,

credibility and controversy' (Banda 2010, 26), allowing 'strangers' (ibid, 25) to encroach on spaces previously the preserve of trained journalists. Mpofu (2015, 89) further highlights the problematics associated with citizen journalism, writing that '[i]n some cases unethical or false reports may be posted by anonymous writers in order to engender hatred, spark outrage or stir protests'. Stuart Allan (2013) argues that while there are discrepancies in approach to news, professional and citizen journalists occupy different yet crucial positions in the reportage of news events. In *Citizen witnessing*, Allan (2013a, 1) offers an extended articulation of citizen journalism which is worth quoting at length:

What does it mean to bear witness in a moment of crisis? Most journalists have been formally trained to be dispassionately impartial when documenting what they see and hear under such circumstances, recognising as they do that the truth-value of their chosen rendering of fact will be at stake. For the ordinary individual, however, any sense of journalism is likely to be far from their mind, should they find themselves unexpectedly caught up in disturbing events rapidly unfolding around them. Nevertheless they may well strive to engage in a form of eyewitness reportage, perhaps using their mobile telephone to capture an image, generate a video, or craft a tweet in order to record and share their personal experience of what is happening in front of them. Such spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment responses, so often motivated by a desire to connect with others, go to the heart of current debates about citizen journalism, one of the most challenging issues confronting the news media today.

The above quotation neatly links with the theory of ethics and moral panics, and highlights important questions on ethics and citizen journalism. Citizen journalism includes user-generated content in online news websites, and the gathering, packaging and sending of information by everyday people to their fellow citizens using such social media platforms as Facebook, SMS, Twitter, WhatsApp and the like. In short, it is when ordinary people tell their stories to the world without being middle-manned by trained journalists. The broader question is: What do citizen journalists understand by ethics, especially in times of crisis? The article attempts to deal with this question and related themes regarding technologies of information sharing when there is the possibility of inciting panic and shock.

In an article on digital age ethics in times of crisis in Zimbabwe and South Africa, Moyo (2015, 125) situates citizen journalism within the broad context of Bauman's (2005) concept of liquid modernity, to argue that there is a need for 'an ontological critique of citizen journalism ethics where the practice must not be judged in relation to the moral taboos of mainstream media'. Just like the current research, Moyo (2015) also partly looks at the South

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African xenophobic attacks that occurred in 2008 and whose 'images' were circulated via social media platforms like Twitter. Moyo rightly notes that a recycling of images from xenophobic attacks took place – attacks not necessarily related to the April 2015 events. This research looks at the same event in a different way, adding a fresh dimension, namely the voices of those who sent and received messages. These individuals are questioned on issues related to ethics and control over their journalistic activities on social media. Moyo's (ibid, 128) work is ground-breaking in terms of confronting issues of ethics in citizen journalism through the use of 'content from which perspectives of journalists were deduced'. The present research, however, goes one step further: it uses interviews with those involved in sending and receiving messages to gather data before asking, from those who also participated in composing and spreading images and information on the xenophobic attacks, questions around the reliability of social media, ethics and the need for control.

Journalism ethics

Each country has its own code of journalistic ethics, i.e., the norms that hallmark responsible journalism. According to Ward (2009, 295), ethics 'is an analysis, evaluation and promotion of what constitutes correct conduct and virtuous character in light of the best available principles'. Thus professional journalists, according to Angela Phillips (2010, 373), view 'investigating, fact checking, and standard of accuracy high among the qualities that set them apart from amateur journalists and bloggers'. Journalism ethics has two basic functions: 1) 'to specify accountability with regard to different outside interests; mainly the state, public, the sources and the advertisers', and 2) the need 'to look good in the eyes of the regulators; to convince them that no further surveillance is needed' (Laitila 1995, 531).

The proliferation of new media technologies has not only affected the way we understand journalism, but has had far-reaching effects on, and sparked debates around, ethics. Pursuant to this, Ward and Wasserman (2010, 275) argue that these developments have shifted the 'parameters of debates about journalism ethics', leading them to advocate for 'open media ethics'. The latter advocates for a more open and broader participation in ethics-related discourse (ibid, 277). Journalism ethics deals mainly with the following problem areas (Ward 2009, 296–297):

- *Accuracy and verification*: how much verification and context is required? How much editing and 'gate-keeping' is necessary?
- *Independence and allegiances*: How can journalists be independent but maintain ethical relations with their employers, editors, advertisers, sources, police and the public?

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- *Deception and fabrication*: Should journalists misrepresent themselves or use recording technology, such as hidden cameras, to get a story? Should [they] invent dialogue or create composite ‘characters’?
- *Graphic images and image manipulation*: When should journalists publish graphic or gruesome images? When do published images constitute sensationalism and exploitation?
- *Sources and confidentiality*: Should journalists promise confidentiality to sources? How far does that protection extend? Should journalists go “off the record”?
- *Special situations*: How should journalists report events that could exacerbate the problem? When should journalists violate privacy?
- *Ethics across media types*: Do the norms of mainstream print and broadcast journalism apply to journalism on the Internet? To citizen journalists?

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Some of these problem areas fall directly into the context of moral panics and citizen journalism, which are focal points of this article. The South African Press Code provides some guidance to citizen journalists, only as far as user-generated content is concerned (see <http://www.presscouncil.org.za/ContentPage?code=PRESSCODE>).

Social media and moral panics

It is common cause that societies go through periods of moral panics at times when certain people, episodes or conditions are identified as threats to societal peace, values and interests. Moral panics, according to Marsh and Melville (2011, 2) refer to

an exaggerated reaction, from the media, the police or wider public, to the activities of particular social groups. These activities may well be relatively trivial but have been reported in a somewhat sensationalised form in the media; such reporting publicly has then led to an increase in general anxiety and concern about those activities. So a moral panic is an exaggerated response to a type of behaviour that is seen as a social problem ... the overreaction magnifies the original area of concern.

The concern of the present authors relates to ethical issues surrounding the use of social media, especially WhatsApp, and the possibilities of causing moral panics through users sending incorrect information. The argument is not that there was no cause for concern or fear during the attacks (especially in a context where the police and government seemed clueless about

how to quell the violence), but that in some cases imported images from previous attacks or from outside South Africa were used as if they formed part of the events of April 2015. Through mobilising fear in this way, those who sent images of the attacks to their contacts either helped save lives by sending truthful information or led disrupted people's social and economic lives unnecessarily.

The net effect of sharing messages with the potential to cause moral panics, besides acting as a warning to recipients, is undergirded by assumptions about the groups – deviant groups that sow moral panic. Cohen (1980), in the case of Mods and Rockers in *Folk devils and moral panics*, suggests that the groups responsible are economically marginalised and behave the way they do because of financial hardships. This could also explain the looting and robberies visited on foreign nationals – especially shop owners – during xenophobic attacks in this country. In addition, arguments by deviant groups that foreign nationals 'steal their jobs and women' suggest a competition for meagre resources and opportunities.

DATA ANALYSIS

While there is a corpus of literature in which victims of xenophobia are given a voice and space to tell their stories (Alan 1998; Dodson 2010), research on xenophobia and media has tended to ignore how people have spoken about it outside of professional mediation by the mainstream media (Nyamnjoh 2010). This section of the article draws from the interview data in an attempt to answer the main research questions relating to the use of social media and the attendant dilemma of ethics during the 2015 xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The interview data was analysed in an attempt to understand the relationships between the use of WhatsApp and impending attacks, as well as the form of reporting past attacks. Further, the researchers sought to understand the possible meanings (in the context of the attacks and the dissemination of related information) of ethics in terms of sending unverified or false messages. Most interviewees were not South African and thus considered themselves 'outsiders' who are in this country for educational and/or employment purposes. What follows is a description and a reproduction some of the images and messages disseminated during the attacks.

One image that was 'popular' featured a woman with deep cuts on her back. The origins of the picture remain unknown, with media reports suggesting that most of the images circulated during the attacks were from West Africa. These never made it into the mainstream media reports or statistics on those killed during the attacks, suggesting that they could not have been related to the 2015 events. Another image notoriously circulated was that of a Mozambican man, Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, who was callously burnt alive during the May

2008 xenophobic attacks. This picture made headlines and gained notoriety in the mainstream media where it was reproduced and dubbed 'the burning man', becoming symbolic of the harrowing treatment of foreigners in xenophobic hotspots in South Africa. Another photo that was widely shared during the 2015 xenophobic attacks showed a family, a mother and a father, carrying their children as they fled attackers armed with various weapons. The photographer, Jon Hrusa, captured this image during the 2008 xenophobic attacks. His death in 2011 made it impossible for him to have captured the image in 2015. The photograph had also been reproduced in the mainstream media during the time. Finally, a harrowing image of a little boy with his T-shirt drenched in blood oozing from a wound on his forehead (he had been shot with a rubber bullet by the South African Police Services during a service delivery protest) was circulated as a foreigner's child who had been hurt during the xenophobic attacks. Even though the picture was shot in 2015, the context was different, not related to xenophobia. Most of the featured videos turned out to be from West Africa, showing people being necklaced or stoned. Besides images and videos, there were several messages which are featured below.

Message 1

It seems that there are attacks planned for Johannesburg on Wednesday: CBD, Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville. [On] Wednesday, Zulu people are coming to town starting from Market [street] their mission is to kill every foreigner on the road please pass this to all your contacts in case they come people should be on alert.

Message 2

Xenophobic attack is just around the corner for the second time around JHB CBD and neighbouring areas like Alex, Olievenhoutbosch, Zandspruit, Msawawa, Cosmo city, Tembisa, Randburg, Princess, Kysand, Kaalfontein, Germiston, Benoni etc ... The spokesperson for this Furious group honourable Khimzman Mquebulera warns his fellow South African on Wednesday not to ride the Bicycles as Malawians and Zimbabweans does, because this attack will be more destructive than ever before, pliz send this notice to ur all frinds to be in doors on Wednesday. Take ir serious our friends r killed like Coackroaches.

Message 3

Wednesday was the day the xenophobic attacks would be carried out avoid public transport, especially trains and taxis. Stay away from isolated areas, don't walk around townships. Please share this warning with friends and foreign families.

Message 4

Leviticus 19:33–34: [W]hen a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.

These images and messages struck fear into the recipients' hearts. In many cases, there were no attacks, despite the predictions in the messages circulated. Three themes emerged most strongly during the interviews: witnessing in times of crisis; citizen journalism and ethics in times of crisis, and control when ethics are infringed on.

Witnessing in times of crisis: Social media during xenophobic attacks

Citizen journalism plays a crucial role in being witness to events or moments of crisis (Allan 2013a, b) where citizen reporters take on the role of journalists and capture, package and disseminate the news event spontaneously (Moyo 2015). The dissemination of messages during the xenophobic attacks created ethical and moral dilemmas for the observers, as the senders proliferated messages of uncertain origin. Citizen journalism includes the use of photography and videography which can be edited to obtain certain effects. Photojournalism includes 'eyewitness', on-the-scene visual reportage which ascribes to certain assumptions, namely: 1) that the view of the photojournalist is accurate, fair and objective, and 2) that the photojournalist 'has both the right and the responsibility to do what is necessary to get the picture for the world to see' (Newton 1998, 4). Ethical considerations in photojournalism include digitally manipulating or staging photographs (e.g., the photojournalist trying to help in a crisis or asking a subject to pose in a certain way). Because of such manipulations (technological advances that have made simple work of digital manipulation), images have come to be 'increasingly unbelievable' in the 21st century (ibid, 9). This brings into question the issue of trustworthiness and the impact of the messages the respondents received and disseminated during the attacks.

Respondent 1 argued that most of the messages sent were 'not relevant ... people use social media to hide their ideas about something. The problem is that you can't tell if it's factual because the person who is reporting it is also not sure if it's factual because social media exaggerates some of the things' (interview, June 6, 2016). Respondent 12 noted that while he was 'not 100% [sure] if the videos were from South Africa', he reasoned that it was probably true of the country 'because of the situation that was taking place here' (interview, June 15, 2016). Some respondents noted that the messages were helpful in that they provided information. Others felt that the messages created an atmosphere of fear. Respondent 4

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(interview, 9 June 2016) noted that the video clips and photographs sent via social media ‘add[ed] fire to it [the xenophobic attacks]’. There is no evidence that the messages and images actually fueled xenophobic attacks. However, the government, worried about the country’s image and South African exceptionalism, discouraged people from sending fake messages and images at risk of prosecution.

One respondent believed that the messages sent during the attacks incited foreign nationals against locals, while another noted that the messages created a negative image of South Africans, when some local communities were trying to protect their foreign neighbours. Most images were circulated in other countries via blogs and WhatsApp. While certain messages were helpful in ‘moving people’s hearts to giving [regarding donations to the displaced]’ (interview, June 9, 2016), many were horrific images (possibly fake) that traumatized the recipients. Respondent 8 (interview, June 14, 2016) similarly noted that the ‘sensationalized’ images spread distorted information and made people fearful. She felt that spreading information was harmful in that information concerning attacks in one part of the country possibly sparked attacks in another. These messages did not have larger contexts, i.e., the ‘full story’ that the news media gave. Rather, they used a single angle. The respondent also noted that while these messages were helpful to the extent that ‘you must be aware of what’s going on [...] the issue comes in when the messages are perpetuating violence’ (interview, June 14, 2016). According to this respondent, such messaging was suggestive of the need to retaliate. For her, the snippets of video clips were ‘only showing you the part to get you riled up’ (ibid.). Respondent 10 noted that the media were initially silent about the attacks. He felt that WhatsApp was more effective, efficient and provided information that was easily communicable to others, so that they were speedily informed about when to go out and what places to avoid. For Respondent 11 (interview, June 13, 2016), while the impact of the messages she received had made her more vigilant, she felt that in terms of the general populace they offered ‘a horrible view of what South Africans are like [and] instilled fear’. She felt that the attackers were in the minority and were not people from within her circle of acquaintances.

It is clear that the messages, pictures and videos sent during the attacks had different effects. Nevertheless, visual media remain powerful conduits of messages, as one editor (cited in Newton 1998, 6) remarked:

A photograph can cause you to stop and look at another person’s life. It’s the only way we’ll get closer to each other ... Even a portrait in some circumstances can be something that helps

us understand how people feel. You feel some kind of connection to a person. You realize there are things you didn't know. A lightbulb has turned on in your heart.

Weeks after the xenophobic attacks began, the presidency issued a statement that South Africans are not generally xenophobic and would prefer to focus on the attacks as mere criminality. President Jacob Zuma (Gqirana 2015) said in his address:

We appeal for calm, an end to the violence and restraint. Criminal elements should not be allowed to take advantage of the concerns of citizens to sow mayhem and destruction. Any problems or issues of concern to South African citizens must be resolved peacefully and through dialogue. The police have been directed to work around the clock to protect both foreign nationals and citizens and to arrest looters and those committing acts of violence ... We reiterate our view that South Africans are generally not xenophobic.

Nevertheless, Zuma acknowledged that black foreign nationals from other African countries compete for meagre resources and low-paying jobs or small businesses with locals, which leads to tensions that sometimes explode. While the Pillay–Sharp debate presents what Dodson (2010, 10) calls ideologically based camps, where 'one is based on political economy and a critique of neoliberal capitalism; the other [is] based on a less materialist, more Foucauldian reading of politics, based on constructions of identity and relations of power', Neocosmos (2010) offers a three-pronged explanation for xenophobia: one addresses state discourse on xenophobia, while the second has to do with South African exceptionalism and the last pertains to citizenship based solely on indigeneity. The state and its organs wittingly or unwittingly practise xenophobia, if one considers how the police use certain tactics to differentiate foreigners from locals, or the way politicians address issues around migration, the movement of people and diplomatic relations. Zuma's derogatory remarks on Malawian roads in 2015 suffice as an example. South African exceptionalism – especially related to the country's progressive constitution and its role in leading democracy on the continent – has given most citizens a sense of superiority over other black people from the rest of Africa. Lastly, indigeneity is used as an argument to allocate resources and opportunities to locals without the test of competition. It seems foreign nationals are 'stuck' between two hard choices: go back home and suffer, or take a risk and eke out a living in South Africa. Leadership's seeming failure in dealing with xenophobes appears to have partly informed the sending of images and false messages by foreigners who felt 'unprotected' by the state and its security agents.

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Clearly, as Ward and Wasserman (2010, 281) rightly argue, the ‘changes in the media ecology are translating into changes to media ethics in terms of intended users, the level and nature of participation, and the content’. Ethics, they argue, is no longer about journalists but about ‘all of “us” – all of us who circulate speculation, rumors, facts, photos, information, and views through a global grid of communication’ (ibid, 281). The next sections dovetail with this one, in helping to create a fuller picture of citizen journalism during crisis moments.

Citizen journalism and perceptions about ethics

Respondents were involved in many groups on WhatsApp, which are populated by people from their church, high school alumni, business contacts, family, friends and sports groups. Some respondents received and sent messages to as many as nine groups at a time. Messages sent included ‘Bible verses’ (Respondent 1, see Message 4 above), pictures and videos. Most videos and images purported to be from the 2015 xenophobic attacks were violent and graphic in nature. The proliferation of falsehoods led to the Minister of State Security, David Mahlobo, issuing a statement that security agents were tracking those responsible for sending fake messages and ‘information suggesting imminent attacks will be communicated to the public through official means’, those sending ‘fictitious and photo-shopped images’ were warned ‘to stop’ (EWN 2015). One message that was widely circulated purported to inform the South African government that the Nigerian-based Islamic terrorist group, Boko Haram, had given it 24 hours to halt the attacks or face reprisals. Most respondents confirmed receiving and sending information regarding the April 2015 attacks to various contacts, especially via WhatsApp, but respondents 2, 4 and 8 did not forward the messages. Respondent 2 spoke to friends and enquired whether they were safe. Phillips (2010, 380) argues that in such cases there is a need for ‘attribution’, which could be tricky for citizen journalists especially in times of crisis: attribution ‘is not only a means of allowing people to trace a story back and check it. It also means of giving credit to the originators of information.’ In times of upheaval it is crucial to obtain verified information, so as to reduce instances of uninformed panic. This is more important in a context where citizen journalism obtains, where people forward rather than create images and messages that provide a record of ‘personal experience of what is happening in front of them’ (Allan 2013b, 17).

Respondent 4 argued: ‘I never took it seriously. They said it’s gonna come to APK [University of Johannesburg main campus in Auckland Park]. I felt safe. I never took it to heart. I did not send messages. I just saw them in the group chats and left them there and watched people debate ... some people said the images were from the previous xenophobic attacks’

(interview, June 9, 2016). Respondent 8, a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, did not forward any of the messages she received, because she had received them from family and friends, the very same people to whom she would have forwarded the messages. When asked if she would have done so had this not been the case she replied that she would have sent the messages only after asking herself if they were worth sending. Thus the authority of presence addressed by Allan (2013a) is critical here, as people seem suspicious of messages whose veracity they cannot ascertain. Further, her rationale for sending any messages would be to inform people or to find out whether certain things had really happened. Respondent 9, a South African, noted that while he had received messages from compatriots (photographs of the looting of foreign-owned shops by locals), he chose not to forward them, since circulating such images would show support for the perpetrators. He felt that the perpetrators and many other South Africans were 'jealous' of their foreign neighbours who were merely making a living (interview, June 14, 2016).

Critics of citizen journalism highlight social media uses such as gathering, packaging and disseminating news, without the oversight of a trained journalist, and sending false messages that cause panic, as ethical drawbacks (Banda 2010; Mpofu 2015). The respondents had different views on the issue of ethics in the use of WhatsApp to spread false information, especially videos and pictures during the xenophobic attacks. In some cases, old pictures from the 2008 attacks were recycled, while videos from West Africa were also disseminated as if they were part of the local attacks. Respondent 5 was sceptical about forwarding certain messages when he became aware that they were unrelated to the 2015 attacks: he became suspicious when they were not broadcast on mainstream electronic media. When asked about the ethics of sending unverified and even false messages, Respondent 5 insisted that even though people sent incorrect messages during the period,

people are generally ethical ... but they were angry that's why they put ethics aside. I wouldn't say at a general level they are not ethical. But at that particular level people became unethical I think mainly because they were angry. People were just communicating that we must be safe ... Even people who are Christian like myself were sending those messages without ... proper verification. (interview, June 9, 2016)

Respondent 3 (interview, June 9, 2016) offered an interesting perspective on ethics in social media in times of crisis:

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Not when you are under attack. Ethics doesn't work when someone's life is in danger. Ethics only work when every other human right has been satisfied then you can go into ethics. It's not ethically right to send such a picture if everything is okay. When things are not okay you don't talk of ethics. We talk of reactionary patterns in your head... in fact you don't think, you only hide. Safety becomes your only need ... You know when you are under attack you don't verify until such a time when you are safe. At that moment it was not my call to verify if they are true or not. What I only wanted to know was is there an attack for me and what I need to do. And secondly when you are safe then you can look into other things ... the authenticity of those pictures then follow. Otherwise if you verify you might be too late.

Respondents who confirmed that they did not forward messages due to their suspicious origins also felt safe in their workplaces and residences. Their distance from the centre of the conflict and violence may have played a major role in allowing them space to consider verifying the messages and analysing their contents. Overall, the above quotations suggest that those who sent the messages meant well. Respondent 5's assertion that Christianity equals ethical conduct throughout one's dealings and actions is informative, speaking to issues of trust in the networks along which messages were exchanged. This does not, however, in any way undo the misuse of social media in this context. According to Moyo (2015, 137), '[m]isrepresentation in citizen journalism must not raise questions of moral responsibility when it comes to checking and verifying facts before sharing, because this is simply impossible in networks'. While the present authors agree that 'risk, uncertainty and ambivalence' are symptoms of such 'liquid journalism' (ibid, 138), they differ from Moyo's assertion of 'impossibility', because users within groups have shown themselves able to moderate each other's content, thus creating moral checks and balances within networks. As described by the research respondents, WhatsApp and Facebook users did alert one another to instances of misinformation and false information regarding the messages exchanged during the April 2015 attacks. Indeed, some interviewees suggested that they checked the veracity of the messages after sending them to their contacts. Respondent 6, for example, said it was only later that he learned that some messages were misrepresentations, having forwarded said messages to many groups. When asked what he had done to remedy the situation, he said he could not do anything as the messages were unrecoverable: 'For me it was a wakeup call that before I share anything I must do my research to find out if it's authentic or not ... I have taken an oath for myself that I am gonna research on anything before I share it' (interview, June 13, 2016).

That citizen journalism and social media could pose security risks (as noted from the State Security Minister's quotations above and Respondent 1's assertion that there is need to control social media if ethics are trampled) is beyond doubt, but the question remains: In a context where social media cause moral panics, is it appropriate for political elites to enforce measures aimed at curtailing abuse? The next section tackles this issue.

Is control a panacea when ethics are trumped?

The South African government's denial of the xenophobic crises of 2008 and 2015 left people having to source their own information and security. Respondent 3 (interview, June 6, 2016) captures the feeling of many succinctly when he asserts that

the government was the lagging party. They have power and means to inform the people quickly. But in such instances they lag. So we take it upon ourselves to inform our relatives basically rather than to wait for the government to do that for us. We are not coming from a country where the government helps people, we are used to helping ourselves. We do not wait for any other person to assist us.

Respondent 1 noted that there should be controls and prosecution for those sending misleading messages, as is already the case in the context of terrorism. He suggested that social media should 'have a separate Bill/Act that covers this issue where, when people mislead other people with false information, they need to be prosecuted for that' (interview, June 6, 2016). Respondent 4 believed that individuals should analyse the information they seek to share before sharing it, to gauge whether it is suitable for forwarding rather than having the state control communications. This implies control by means of an internal compass. Respondent 5 believed that in a democratic country people are supposed to be free to communicate, and he did not advocate social media controls since doing so would 'defeat ... what do you call? The right to privacy! It would defeat that ... so let's allow people to communicate. People are supposed to be free to communicate whatever they want to communicate without fear of anything happening to them' (interview, June 13, 2016). Respondent 6 similarly noted that controls were not conducive to free speech. He believed that ethics is subjective and that any form of control would be unsatisfactory to one group or another. Respondent 8 noted that 'perhaps there should be controls', but that this would be 'difficult to judge' as there would be no 'defining line', adding that while 'it would be interesting to try to control the information [...] [I'm] not sure to what extent...'. According to Respondent 8, whoever provides a social media platform

should be responsible for checking what is posted, but because of the sheer volume it would be 'difficult to control'. The risks of posting material unrelated to the attacks exposes what Moyo (2015, 136) calls the dark side of citizen journalism, 'where content that misrepresents issues may circulate in networks with the huge risk of causing reputational damage for a country or even inciting civil disorder'. As noted, South African political leaders failed to give direction to the nation or to provide security to immigrants at critical times, which made it justifiable, to some, to send whatever messages they received since safety was deemed more important than reputation.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, it seems appropriate to reflect on Allan's (2013a, 25) incisive question: 'What does it mean to bear witness in a moment of crisis?' Most of the research interviewees alluded to the fact that during the xenophobic attacks they did not concern themselves with ethics when sending messages, since their safety and that of their families and friends was paramount. Sending manipulated or decontextualised pictures and videos was not seen as a breach of ethical considerations: Respondent 5 insisted that people are ethical and the xenophobic attacks and communicative activities relating to that were not in any way valid measures of people's ethical conduct in online communication. Respondent 3 also highlighted the fact that the government and other authorities were not forthcoming with information about what was happening, nor was political leadership shown by the presidency and security cluster during the event – they only became vocal weeks into the attacks. Also, their responses seemed calculated to buttress South African exceptionalism, with President Zuma arguing that South Africans are not xenophobic. Most official speeches propagated the idea that the xenophobic attacks could be attributed to criminal elements. This, to some, echoed the lack of decisiveness by former President Mbeki in 2008, hence many foreign nationals thought it prudent to communicate information which may have caused panic and painted South Africa(ns) in a negative light through unverified and false videos and pictures. Respondent 3, however, argued that the most important issue was not the integrity of the country, but the safety of those under threat, suggesting that if four out of ten messages were false, the fact that the majority might be accurate was reason enough to forward them. Moyo argues that citizen journalists may infringe on ethics not necessarily because they are bad people, but because they see themselves as citizens and human beings first, and journalists second. '[W]e live in modern societies that are obsessed with the codification of ethics, resulting in an overemphasis on rules at the expense

of the moral responsibility we owe one another as human beings and citizens' (Moyo 2015, 141).

The interviewees had a point when they saw the dissemination of manipulated, false and decontextualised images, messages and videos as unproblematic, as they acted as moral beings, owing a duty of care to their fellow foreigners in South Africa. Some respondents confirmed that they were corrected or witnessed others being corrected for sending messages that were unrelated to the xenophobic attacks. Thus it seems there is a possibility of peer-to-peer monitoring and the enforcement of ethics on citizen journalists' platforms, without any political interference (as suggested by the Minister of State Security, alluded to earlier). Ward and Wasserman (2010, 286), in support of this, observe that the changed relationships between journalists and citizens/audiences has made it possible for 'ethical self-regulation [to take] place outside the professional realm between citizen journalists themselves' since it would be impossible for the press council or security services to monitor and control information sent via such platforms as WhatsApp. Similarly, Moyo (2015, 142) concludes that citizen journalism ethics are 'constantly in a state of becoming' and there is no urgent need to impose ethics when it is clear that even though precarious, there is potential for peer-to-peer monitoring, correction and reformation. The authors concur with Moyo (2015, 125), that 'citizen journalism ethics in crisis settings are [...] ambivalent, nascent, fluid, individualised, situational, and sometimes contradictory'. And based on this there is no clear benefit, as suggested by the respondents, in professional journalism ethics being applied to citizen journalism. However, it is important to emphasise the value of peer-to-peer monitoring and correction, as well as the need for a changed approach towards citizen journalism, especially on the part of those scholars who deem professional journalism to be the only form of 'journalism'.

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