

# Review of: "Animation and YouTube as Alternative and Counterhegemonic Digital Public Sphere in Zimbabwe"

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The paper titled 'Animation and YouTube Alternative and Counter hegemonic Digital Public Sphere in Zimbabwe' is an interesting read, for two major reasons both indicated in the abstract. First, the chosen topic which indicates a focus on Subaltern methods of resistance to an oppressive government determined to clamp down on any dissenting voices – (either from the general public or political oppositions); and secondly, the chosen field, which presents an opportunity to analyze an alternative, but counter mass media platform in the form of a social media outlet, namely the Digital Public Sphere (DPS). The authors cite Gambiza (2020) and describe the DPS as a counter discourse channel which is unmanned and unregulated by the state

In their abstract, the authors describe alternative Digital Public Sphere (DPS) as operated in Zimbabwe as 'counter hegemonic' because '...democratic forces conspire and contest official state propaganda and assert themselves as viable counter publics.' The authors continue by stating that 'The study argues that the DPS has promoted alternative discourses to those of the official public sphere. While the Subaltern counter publics have used alternative digital public spaces to question the official consensus, they have instead emerged as undemocratic platforms promoting and perpetuating the same hate and binary narratives that it accuses the state of proliferating.'

In their study of the relationship between social media and Zimbabwean mass and oppositional resistance, the authors propose that resistance discourses through the DPS is more of a propaganda. To put their theory in perspective, the authors use the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) resistance to the ZANU PF (the ruling party) through animation texts. To do this, the paper uses selected animations taken from seven episodes of Nyoka and Kunyepa to 'analyze animation as a purveyor of counter hegemonic propaganda' (p.2). In addition, they considered 'how dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted' (p.3) through the selected animations.

However, the authors do not provide the link to the YouTube site which was a foundational flaw. Building upon this flaw was the limited research methodology adopted in selecting the animation form. More disturbing is the interpretation of the animation series and selected figures used for the study. In their study narrative, the authors accuse the animation series creators of constructing the MDC as the most popular and widely supported political party in Zimbabwe thus 'legitimising the MDC' and presenting the opposition party 'in an exclusive treatment ...as the credible and sole democratic political party in Zimbabwe' (p.3). The authors indicate that 'the animation's topical issue is the relationship between the state and the MDC with the later given favourable frames' (p.4).

A YouTube search of the animation can be found here <https://www.youtube.com/results?>

search\_query=Nyoka+and+Kunyepa. On YouTube, the animation is presented in 8 series namely: *Nyoka & Kunyepa – Rovai Mhunu* (uploaded June 4, 2013, however the context of this series is dated as the 29<sup>th</sup> of May), *Nyoka and Kunyepa – Aliens* (uploaded on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, 2013), *Nyoka and Kunyepa – Cabinet meeting* (uploaded on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, 2013, however the setting is dated as being on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June), *Nyoka and Kunyepa – Maputo* (uploaded on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 2013), *Nyoka and Kunyepa – A simple matter* (uploaded on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, 2013), *Nyoka and Kunyepa – Don't say that word* (uploaded on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, 2013, however the context is set on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July), *Nyoka and Kunyepa – Red Power* (uploaded on the 17<sup>th</sup> July 2013), *Nyoka and Kunyepa – Out with a Bang* (uploaded on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July, 2013 within the context dated on the 18<sup>th</sup> of July). Each animation series has a short introduction provided by the creators aimed at giving the viewers a background to the scripts, the actors and the events occurring within the context of each script. The creators introduce the main characters (Nyoka and Kunyepa) as Zimbabwean Central Intelligence Officers (CIOs) whose major duty is to do everything possible to prevent free and fair elections from taking place in Zimbabwe. In addition to the two CIOs are ZIM1 (late Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe) and ZIM2 (General Chiwenga, who at that time was the head of the Zimbabwean military army, and Mugabe's e-personal aide). Other appearances include the former South African president, Jacob Zuma, former American presidents Barrack Obama and Donald Trump. Themes focused on by the cartoon scripts include the tactics employed by the Zimbabwean ruling party ZANU PF to rig the elections through the motto 'delay, deceive and distort' (delaying voter registration, deceiving new voters into thinking their votes do not count, distorting the numbers of registered voters) through the help of Israelis. Other side themes include the ailing health of Robert Mugabe, the reduction of respect and loyalty by soldiers of the army, and a call for a change of government by the masses. Other themes include foreign leaders expressing their disappointment and embarrassment of the Zimbabwean leadership, its role in assassinations within the country, and rumors of attempted assassinations of South African government officials by the Zimbabwean government.

This review has deliberately outlined the cartoon scripts in an attempt to emphasize that little to nothing is said in the animation episodes about the opposition parties and their leaders; contrary to the analysis of the authors. To further illustrate this, a review of the figures used by the authors in the paper will be done.

Figure 1 (taken from the cartoon episode titled *Nyoka and Kunyepa – Maputo*). The authors interpret this image as a representation of a deliberate exclusion of other political parties from the animation's publics. However, to put Figure 1 in context the preceding scene needs to be mentioned. This scene captures Kunyepa on his mobile phone receiving orders from ZIM2 who instructs him to go to the mobile voting centers and make sure that new voters are frustrated. Viewers are then taken to the scene where ZIM2 is captured at his desk. ZIM2 turns to ZIM1 who is seated behind listening to the phone conversation and says, "Your Excellency, I promise, I will make sure these dogs do not vote us out". We are then taken to the scene depicted in Figure 1 which is an election registration center. There, we see a large queue of prospective voters waiting in line to be registered by an MDC official who is absent to the perplexity of the crowd. Beside the MDC stand is that of ZANU PF which has a registration official seated but no prospective voters to be registered. The comrades appear at the scene, and we see Nyopa laughingly telling his comrade "These fools will wait all day for nothing to happen" and Kunyepa replies "Yes, they can't vote if they can't register". They both continue to laugh.

Figure 2 (taken from the episode titled *Nyoka & Kunyepa – Red Power*), the authors interpret this figure by stating that the

animators 'make unsubstantiated information concerning the popularity of the MDC appear authentic. The intention is to delegitimize other opposition parties ZANU PF and the electoral process insinuating that the MDC is the most viable and outstanding opposition party worthy to take over the reins of power' (pg. 6). To give a context to this scene depicted in Figure 2, the preceding scene will be given where ZIM1 is depicted on a stretcher with his entourage in a helicopter. He asks ZIM2 who sits beside him in the next isle why his private helicopter has not been authorized to take off to which ZIM2 explains that there has been a sabotage. The scene ends with ZIM1 crying and saying "Nobody loves me anymore" and ZIM2 also observing "Nobody is scared of me anymore! Oh no." It is after this scene that the two comrades are captured passing through the depicted image of Figure 2. In this scene, the two comrades pass through a red crowd and as they drive by Nyoka tells his partner, "Everywhere I go I feel afraid comrade" to which Kunyepa replies with the question, "Is it true that the people are no longer scared of us?" Nyoka asks in return "Do you think we should be worried?" Kunyepa's response: "Yes Comrade, we should be very worried".

Figure 3 (taken from the cartoon episode titled *Nyoka and Kunyepa – Cabinet Meeting*). The authors interpret the message to mean 'vulgarity became a way of expressing anger over the manner in which the military meddled in civilian affairs. The use of vulgarity in a dispute is a testimony and sign of extreme anger' (pg.8). This notion, however, is not the context within which this left section of Figure 3 is depicted. The animation presents this scene as Kunyepa is receiving instructions from ZIM2 of a tactic developed by Israeli consultants which is to 'delay, deceive and distort.' It is while receiving these instructions that Nyoka and Kunyepa's drive past the two soldiers depicted on the left half of Figure 3. Now, although Kunyepa who received the instruction informs ZIM2 of the brilliance of the strategy, there is great sadness in the last scene of this episode when they drive up to a long queue of civilians and at the end of the queue are three soldiers also queuing (probably to be registered to vote). Kunyepa says to his partner "Things are not looking good my friend, even the young soldiers, they want to see a new Zimbabwe"; to which Nyoka replies, "Hmm, it's very bad comrade."

In relation to the right hand side of Figure 3 ('GET OUT YOU DOG!') this appears in the episode titled *Nyoka & Kunyepa – Red Power* where the main characters (and by extension the government) are shocked about the large amounts of graffiti springing up in the town. On seeing the sign depicted on the right half of Figure 3, Kunyepa tells his partner "These young soldiers are becoming very troublesome" to which Nyoka replies "It seems these young soldiers are not afraid anymore." Kunyepa expresses the feeling of the ruling party in his response "Yes very worrying."

As a reviewer, time and efforts have been invested to alert the authors of the injustice done to the animation creators due to their misrepresentation and wrong interpretation of the form, text, and meaning of the animation episodes. It is, thus, strongly advised that the authors reconcile this and realign their discourse around a less biased and more insightful and in-depth analysis of the data adopted for this study. This misinterpretation of data and its context has greatly reduced the quality of the paper which holds a great promise.