

“ANC and DA clash!” Conflicting political constellations in South Africa’s Daily Sun and implications for public sphere discussions

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Abstract

We report on an analysis of how language was used to position South Africa’s two largest political parties in the Daily Sun, South Africa’s erstwhile biggest-selling tabloid newspaper. The concepts of constellations and cosmologies from Legitimation Code Theory (LCT; Maton, 2014) show how political positioning is accomplished. Negative characteristics of South Africa’s two largest parties, the African National Congress (ANC) and Democratic Alliance (DA), are foregrounded. This contributes to a narrative depicting politicians as “trash”, characteristic of what Barnett labelled “the age of contempt” (2002, p. 405). Coupled with this is a decline in trust in the media’s capability to supply accurate knowledge in the “post-truth” era (Dahlgren, 2018). This narrative appears to be inimical to the development of healthy political discussion in the alternative public sphere (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004, p. 284) facilitated by the Daily Sun. Despite this, we argue that the Daily Sun and other tabloids remain useful vehicles for constructive public dialogue about South Africa’s future, and we suggest some ways in which such discussion could be facilitated.

Keywords

Tabloids, public spheres, constellations, axiological-semantic density, Legitimation Code Theory

Introduction

After more than 25 years of democracy, South Africa remains in a situation where there is equal access to the vote, but vastly unequal distribution of the resources needed to make one's voice heard in dominant public spheres (Habermas, 1989, p. 72; Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004, p. 286). This inequality of discursive resources, compounded by South Africa's status as the society with the deepest economic inequality in the world, erupted in "a wave of looting and unrest that left over 300 people dead" (Aidi, 2021, p. 1) in July 2021, which was precipitated by the arrest of former president Jacob Zuma. There is an urgent need to ensure that more people's voices are heard in democratic conversations to prevent further violence.

Politically, post-apartheid South Africa is characterized by disaffection with its largest former liberation movement, the African National Congress (ANC) (de Jager & Meintjes, 2013, p. 233; Reddy, 2010, p. 185). This centre-left party, with an African nationalist orientation (Booyesen, 2011), commanded most of the vote in each election since 1994, but its support dropped to a low of 40% in the 2024 national elections (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024). Meanwhile, voter turnout in these elections was a mere 59% of registered voters (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024), raising concerns about voter apathy, particularly among youth (Hofmeyr, 2024).

The country's second-largest party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), is a centre-right liberal party, with a traditionally white and coloured (mixed-race) support base (Anciano, 2016). It has struggled to shake off its reputation as the party of white privilege (Southern, 2011). Still, its support has grown as the ANC's has waned, and it held 22% of the vote in the 2024 elections (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2024). Following the ANC's loss of its majority in the 2024 elections, the DA has joined the ANC in a multi-party Government of National Unity. However, the deep-seated antagonism between the two parties is evident from the fact that the ANC refused the idea of a simple ANC–DA coalition following the elections, preferring to create a multi-party government (Chothia et al., 2024).

In this context, we investigate the coverage of political parties in the *Daily Sun*, South Africa's biggest-selling tabloid newspaper, to show how tabloid content has the potential to facilitate public-sphere discussion of politics in South Africa. We describe how the *Daily Sun* construes what is happening in South African political discourses and associates particular political stances and moral evaluations with the country's largest political parties. The *Daily Sun*'s parent company, Media24, decided to close the newspaper's print edition in 2024 but continue its online presence (Fraser, 2024). Given the trend towards tabloidization in news coverage, this article explores how tabloid content can stimulate robust and constructive discussion of countries' political futures in public spheres.

The analysis reported on forms one small part of a larger study of the use of language in political positioning in the *Daily Sun*, involving both analysis of broad-scale trends in

six months’ worth of political news coverage, dated from January to June 2015, and fine-grained analysis of individual articles exemplifying these trends.

Section 2 describes the *Daily Sun*’s hotly debated role in South Africa’s public spheres in an “age of contempt” (Barnett, 2002), in which many ordinary citizens hold party politicians in disdain. Following this, in section 3, we review various studies using different frameworks to analyze political positioning in media discourses, particularly in South Africa, and motivate our use of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT), which was developed to describe knowledge-building practices, as opposed to other frameworks, to examine how political knowledge is built in the *Daily Sun*. In section 4, we introduce the concepts from LCT that have assisted us in describing the positioning of political parties in this newspaper: semantic density, constellations, and cosmologies. Section 5 gives our reasons for selecting one news article, “ANC and DA clash!”, as an exemplar of trends in the positioning of the ANC in the *Daily Sun* over the period under investigation. In Section 6, we report on our fine-grained analysis of this article. Finally, section 7 recommends how, based on this research, tabloids such as the *Daily Sun* can facilitate discussion in alternative public spheres more effectively.

Does the *Daily Sun* facilitate an alternative public sphere?

The *Daily Sun* was by far the largest of a wave of South African tabloid newspapers established in the post-apartheid era. In 2015, the year from which the data for this research was collected, it boasted a readership of 4.7 million, or 12.3% of South Africa’s adult population (South African Audience Research Foundation, 2015). By 2023, this increased only marginally to 4.951 million (Newsclip, 2024). It targets South Africa’s large Black working class and lower middle class (Froneman, 2006, p. 29). Its contents include what has become perceived as usual tabloid fare: celebrity reporting, scandals, sex, and sports. However, the *Daily Sun* also carries a small amount of political content, often syndicated from Media24.

Media24 is a subsidiary of Naspers, a formerly white-owned conglomerate previously known as Nasionale Pers (National Press) during the apartheid era (Wigston, 2001). Naspers’ coverage tended to be sympathetic to the apartheid government before its Information Scandal in the 1970s, in which government funds were secretly used to establish *The Citizen*, an English-language newspaper that portrayed the government sympathetically (Wigston, 2001). The scandal prompted Naspers to become more critical of the apartheid government (Wigston, 2001). In the post-apartheid era, in 1999, Naspers sold a minority of its shares to “more than 17 000 previously disadvantaged people” (Berger, 2001, p. 155), and the Public Investment Corporation, which invests money for (mostly Black) government employees’ pension funds, later bought a 15% stake in Media24 (Rumney, 2015). Media24 has maintained a traditional “watchdog” orientation towards the post-apartheid South African government (Rumney, 2023). It carries out a significant

amount of investigative journalism, including investigation of large-scale corruption in government, known as state capture.

There has been heated and protracted debate as to the extent to which the *Daily Sun* facilitates an alternative public sphere in which its predominantly working-class readership can discuss topics that concern them. Habermas (1989, p. 24) initially conceived of the public sphere as a place where private individuals come together to discuss matters of public interest. Particularly pertinent to this study is how the public sphere is meant to act as a “warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive throughout society” (Habermas, 1996, p. 359), pointing, for example, to gaps in service delivery and other societal problems.

Habermas’ theorization of the public sphere has been critiqued by Fraser (1992), among others, for several reasons: It tends to ignore how social differences skew the distribution of discursive resources towards those who already command social power, it limits the range of topics that can be discussed in the public sphere to matters that are deemed by the socially dominant to be in the public interest, and it limits the mode of discourse that can legitimately be used in the public sphere to “rational-critical debate” (Habermas, 1989, p. 51). Following Fraser (1992, p. 115), we acknowledge the existence of multiple public spheres, including alternative public spheres (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004, p. 284), which are spaces in which dominated groups can organize themselves to make a stronger impression in engagements with the dominant public sphere.

In recent years, the digitization of much of the current news media offerings and the popularity of social media have precipitated what Habermas has labelled a “further structural transformation of the public sphere” (2022, p. 145). Filter bubbles and echo chambers on social media are fragmenting the dominant public sphere. Despite this, we argue that the *Daily Sun* fulfils an important function in facilitating an alternative public sphere. While the implications of its migration to an online-only publication have yet to be explored, our working assumption is that much of the *Daily Sun*’s audience, and the public sphere discussion it facilitates, has also migrated online with it. While the linkages between this alternative public sphere and broader publics may have weakened, the publication continues to serve as a lively forum for political opinion formation.

According to previous research, tabloids like the *Daily Sun* facilitate an important alternative public sphere in several ways. They give “cultural recognition” (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004, p. 285) to their readers, allowing them to enjoy seeing themselves represented in the newspaper, which is one of the reasons for the tabloids’ success (Jones et al., 2008, p. 177).

This kind of recognition extends to group identity. It marks the distinctions between an in-group of readers of the *Daily Sun*, for example, and the rest of society as an out-group (Jones et al., 2008, p. 177). The *Daily Sun* indeed has a distinctive style in which it portrays this imagined community, referring to them as “SunReaders” (quoted in Smith & Adendorff, 2014b, p. 202) in “SunLand” (Boshoff, 2021, p. 50).

Smith and Adendorff (2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d) give further evidence for the functioning of SunReaders as an imagined community in a series of articles using SFL's Appraisal system to analyse letters to the *Daily Sun*. These articles show how the *Daily Sun's* readers affiliate around shared bonds and disaffiliate themselves from others not part of the community. Smith and Adendorff's work shows that the *Daily Sun's* readers engaged enthusiastically and vigorously with each other on the letters page, allowing the imagined community to facilitate a robust alternative public sphere.

This is corroborated by Olorunnisola et al. (2021), who show through interviews with *Daily Sun* staff, readers, and third parties that the *Daily Sun* is perceived as effectively fulfilling a need for an alternative public sphere serving working-class South Africans.

Boshoff (2021) examines how women are portrayed in the imagined community of Sunland and shows that the *Daily Sun's* letters page confirmed that the tabloid was used as a space for readers to debate South Africa's gender order.

Tabloids such as the *Daily Sun* can function as valuable sources of information for working-class communities in times of crisis through what is sometimes called service journalism or campaign journalism (Eide, 1997). For example, Bosch and Wasserman (2023) found that whereas the South African mainstream media's coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic tended to be alarmist and overwhelmingly negative, the *Daily Sun* reported on the pandemic in a neutral, factual manner, emphasizing how it affected ordinary people's lives using a reporting style that Siebörger (forthcoming) labels "individualized challenge", and combatting misinformation about the pandemic.

The close-knit imagined community of SunReaders excludes government and public officials, viewing them as an "other" that is often indifferent to their struggles (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010, p. 542). This is illustrated vividly in sentiments expressed in an editorial column by the *Daily Sun's* former editor, Themba Khumalo:

Hope ... It's what gives us the courage to carry on ... no matter how terrible life seems to be ... But the very WORST thing to do is to invest your hopes in politicians! They have an amazing ability to TRAMPLE your hopes into the dust. They can NEVER be trusted to fulfil your dreams ... Therefore, it is up to every one of us to improve our own surroundings.
(*Daily Sun*, 26 November 2007, p. 8, quoted in Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010, p. 540)

Such an attack orientation towards political parties is well-established in the West, as illustrated by the case of Spanish online journalism, where various publications have been sharply critical of the country's political class and its two-party system (Labio & Pineda, 2016).

Barnett argues that such portrayals of politicians are characteristic of an "age of contempt" (2002, p. 405) which is corrosive to democratic engagement and, if left unchecked, will cause degradation in the quality of democratic governments. Continued cynical coverage of politicians' actions will exacerbate the extent to which working-class people feel alienated from mainstream politics, causing further declines in voter turnout. Further,

intelligent, well-qualified young people will avoid political careers partly due to the vilification of politicians in the media.

The “age of contempt” narrative is compounded by an “epistemic crisis” (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 20) eroding trust in the ability of the media to build truthful knowledge, especially concerning politics, and, further, in the possibility of knowing such truth in the first place. The result is the “post-truth” era. However, Zelizer (2025) points out that this crisis has not erupted out of nowhere; there are continuities between the current “post-truth” era and earlier propaganda from periods such as the Cold War. The “post-truth” era has simply exacerbated previous trends that tend to balkanize and polarize public opinion. As Waisbord writes, “post-truth communication denotes the perennial absence of conditions for citizens to concur on objectives and processual norms” (2018, p. 1871). Tabloids’ content may be seen as symptomatic of the “post-truth” era, emphasizing emotion and personal or communal beliefs and speaking only to specific, imagined communities of belief and feeling. However, as the example of the *Daily Sun*’s role in the Covid-19 pandemic shows, tabloids also have great potential to counteract misinformation. The imagined communities they foster can provide contexts where trust is cultivated and constructive dialogue emerges, both online and in person. In Section 5, we describe a *Daily Sun* news article which, though it seems to perpetuate negative stereotyping of party politics, allows us to show how political news coverage can be used to develop democratic public sphere discussions among the *Daily Sun*’s readership.

Media discourses, political positioning, and knowledge

A wide variety of approaches have been used to analyze political positioning in the media, including agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), item response theory (e.g., Ho & Quinn, 2008), network analysis (e.g., Ebeling et al., 2023), content analysis (e.g., Pineda & Almiron, 2013), critical discourse analysis (CDA) (e.g., Bhatia, 2006), and corpus linguistics (CL) (e.g., Baker et al., 2008). Space constraints preclude a comprehensive review of these; instead, in this section, we discuss examples from content analysis, CDA, and CL to motivate our use of LCT to analyse how the *Daily Sun* reproduces political knowledge for circulation in the alternative public sphere it facilitates. In section 4, we demonstrate how our approach resonates with the Network Agenda Setting Model (Guo, 2013), a recent development in agenda-setting theory.

In media studies, content analysis has frequently been used to describe broad trends in the representation of political parties in the media. It is helpful in demonstrating these trends quantitatively; for example, Hameleers and Vliegthart (2020) use content analysis to show an increase in populist coverage in Dutch newspapers between 1990 and 2017. Pineda and Almiron (2013) used content analysis to show that the opinion content of the most popular Spanish online-only newspapers is skewed towards right-wing views. In South Africa, Hyde-Clarke (2011) used content analysis to examine news coverage of the

rhetoric of Julius Malema, who was then the president of the ANC Youth League before being expelled from the ANC and forming his own party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Content analysis can reveal insights into the frequencies of occurrence of political actors, words, and themes in the media but is ill-equipped to trace the relationships between these actors, words, and themes or to discover what gives coherence to the discourses in which they appear.

CDA is another prevalent framework for analysing political positioning, used in diverse social science disciplines. This framework draws on features identified in various linguistic theories. It uses these as evidence that certain ideologies are encoded in texts, often in the service of reproducing existing power relations (Fairclough, 2001). Bhatia (2006) examines political press conferences in which former US President George W. Bush and former Chinese President Jiang Zemin shared a podium, showing how each attempted to persuade audiences of their political standpoints while evading inconvenient questions.

In South Africa, CDA has been put to a wide variety of uses in analysing political discourses. Beard (2023) uses CDA to analyse the editorial positioning of *The Star*, a prominent Johannesburg newspaper, towards state capture from 2015 to 2018, concluding that the newspaper became more and more critical of then-president Jacob Zuma over this period. Els (2015) uses this framework to show that the *Daily Sun* reinforced xenophobic attitudes in its portrayal of African immigrants at the time of a wave of xenophobic violence in 2008. Mabela et al. (2020) use CDA to analyse how former South African president Jacob Zuma, former DA leader Mmusi Maimane, and EFF leader Julius Malema position themselves in their speeches.

A growing number of researchers use CL together with CDA to analyse political discourses in the media. A corpus is a collection of examples of usually naturally occurring language use made for linguistic analysis (Kennedy, 1998, p. 1). CL usually involves using computer software to identify large-scale patterns in such collections. Analysts have found that CL helps them avoid bias or accusations that they are "cherry-picking" data to suit their preconceived ideas (Baker, 2010). While specific researcher-identified actors or themes are counted in content analysis, CL enables the quantitative analysis of all word usage in texts, enabling a more inductive approach to studying media texts.

Baker et al. (2008) use CDA and CL to analyse how refugees, asylum-seekers, and immigrants were portrayed in the UK press between 1996 and 2005. In South Africa, Crymble (2015) conducted a similar study investigating the representation of immigrants in three influential South African newspapers from 2006 to 2010. Huan and Deng use CL to show how China is portrayed both positively as a "partner" and negatively as a "predator" (2021, p. 46) in the South African media. In this study, we use CL to contextualize our analysis by identifying broad trends in the representation of political parties in the *Daily Sun* during the first six months of 2015 and to aid in selecting one news article as an exemplar of some of these trends.

There is substantial research on how the media build audiences' knowledge. Donohue et al. (1973) examined how mass media institutions are influential in distributing knowledge throughout society. Schwach et al. (1992) show how the media take part in a “perpetual pedagogy” (Giroux & McLaren, 1992, p. xxiv), shaping what audiences know about politics and other matters of public interest. As shown in section 2, the status of the information disseminated by the media as knowledge is increasingly being questioned in the “post-truth” era (Dahlgren, 2018).

Recently, some researchers have begun using LCT to investigate how this knowledge is structured. Doran (2020) uses constellation analysis from LCT (described further in section 4) to analyse news articles written in response to a debate about whether the arrival of European settlers in Australia should be considered an “invasion”. Szenes (2021) uses constellation analysis to describe the propaganda of far-right eco-fascist groups in Hungary and the Nordic countries. These studies and ours are interested in how stances in various debates are linked together in political discourse and how these are used to build audiences' knowledge of the character of political groupings and the policies they advance. LCT is emerging as a powerful tool for analysing how political discourses contribute to audiences' political knowledge.

Legitimation code theory: Semantic density, constellations, and cosmologies

LCT is a sociological theory that develops the work of Bernstein (1990, 1999, 2000) in theorizing knowledge (re)production, as well as Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Maton, 2014). We use LCT's concept of *semantic density* to describe how news articles reproduce popular knowledge about politics. The following brief explanation draws extensively from Maton (2014, pp. 125–170). Semantic density is the extent to which meaning is condensed into a relatively small number of words or symbols. For example, the statement, “Poor infrastructure is a barrier to development in emerging economies”, possesses relatively strong semantic density, as words such as “infrastructure”, “development”, and “economies” are shorthand for complex groups of concepts and thus carry large amounts of meaning. Semantic density fluctuates over the unfolding of a knowledge practice, such as a news article or a school lesson, and this fluctuation can be described using a graph called a semantic profile, such as Figure 2 in Section 6.

Two mechanisms by which the semantic density of knowledge can be strengthened are *epistemological* and *axiological condensation*. Epistemological condensation is a process of condensing descriptions of experiences or empirical data into progressively briefer statements. For example, Einstein's famous formula, $E = mc^2$, has strong *epistemic-semantic density* (ESD) since it displays the results of large amounts of empirical research in a few symbols.

Meanwhile, axiological condensation is a process of condensing "affective, aesthetic, ethical, political and moral stances" (Maton, 2014, p. 130). For example, the word "democracy" has strong *axiological-semantic density* (ASD) since it denotes a political system and is associated with positive affective and moral values for many people. Since axiological-semantic density concerns political stances and moral values, this is the variant of semantic density that we concentrate on in this article. Stronger semantic density is usually marked with a "+" sign (e.g., SD+, ESD+, or ASD+), while weaker semantic density is marked with a "-" sign (e.g. SD-, ESD-, or ASD-).

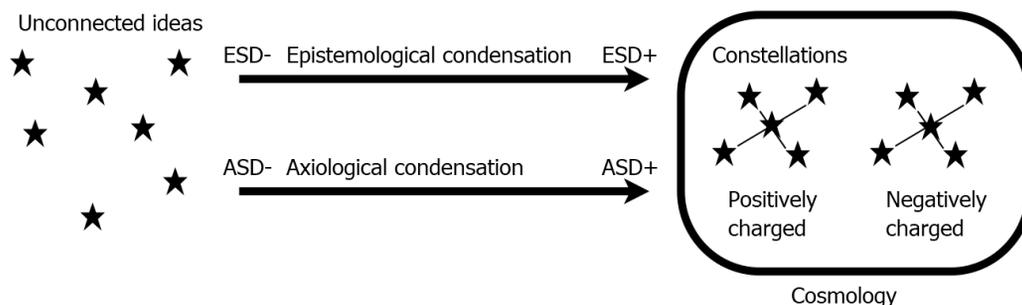
Both axiological and epistemological condensation group concepts, positions, values, or ideas together into what Maton (2014, p. 152) calls *constellations*. As stars in a constellation appear close to each other from the viewpoint of Earth but may be positioned far apart from each other in space, so ideas in a constellation may be completely unrelated in reality, but appear to be clustered together from the perspective of knowledge (re)producers. This means that people from different perspectives may have different constellations. In previous research we conducted on a contentious parliamentary committee meeting (Siebörger & Adendorff, 2017), we found that members of parliament (MPs) from the ruling ANC constellated "democracy" together with "development" by casting themselves as "pro-development" for being in favour of the passing of a particular budget. By contrast, opposition MPs constellated "democracy" with "rigorous oversight" by positioning themselves as pro-democracy through their desire to critically examine the budget rather than pass it.

Constellations frequently grow around one main idea or concept, a *central signifier*. These constellations are usually *charged* with value: They can be evaluated positively, negatively, or neutrally. If one item in a constellation (referred to as a *signifier*) is charged, this *charging* tends to spread out to the other ideas in the same constellation. In this way, charging introduces biases into the knowledge which is reproduced. This article examines how constellations centred on South Africa's two largest parties, the ANC and DA, are charged using language.

Constellations gain their cohesion from knowledge (re)producers' *cosmologies*. According to LCT, a cosmology is a principle explaining why certain sets of ideas are popular and influential in a particular society, and others are not (Maton, 2014, p. 152). Cosmologies are not equivalent to ideologies but explain why some ideologies are favoured over others. By way of consolidation, the relationship between semantic density, constellations, and cosmologies is depicted in Figure 1. *Epistemological cosmologies* gain epistemic power from their ability to explain and integrate large amounts of empirical knowledge. In contrast, *axiological cosmologies* allow users to gain social power from their ability to classify diverse groups of knowers. An analysis of the constellations reproduced in media discourses has considerable potential to reveal how different actors or groups are positioned and what cosmologies underlie this positioning, so we report on such an analysis of one sample article in section 6.

Figure 1

A diagrammatic representation of the relationship between semantic density, constellations and cosmologies



As alluded to in section 3, constellation analysis has resonances with the Network Agenda Setting Model (Guo, 2013), a development in agenda-setting theory. Central to this model is the idea that the news media not only shape the political agendas of members of the public but also influence the networks of ideas that these individuals hold. Such networks are analogous to constellations as described in LCT. This opens up a possibility for this study's findings to be compared with research drawing on agenda-setting theory.

Method

The article we describe was selected for fine-grained analysis because it illustrates specific trends found in the positioning of the ANC in the six months (January–June 2015) of the *Daily Sun's* political news that we analysed as part of a broader research project.

This period includes various events that have had a lasting impact on South African political discourses. In February 2015, then-president Jacob Zuma's State of the Nation Address was disrupted by MPs from the EFF, protesting alleged corruption by Zuma in a scandal relating to public funds spent on his private residence in Nkandla, KwaZulu-Natal. This address was dubbed "Shame of the Nation" by one journalist (Davis, 2015), and for many, it represented a low point in the development of South African democracy under Zuma's presidency. Widespread xenophobic violence in March and April 2015 highlighted perennial problems with South Africa's lack of social cohesion (Abrahams, 2016). Lastly, Mmusi Maimane was elected as the first Black leader of the DA in May 2015, a momentous occasion affecting political discourses within the party and the country's public spheres in general.

For the project, we collected all the news articles mentioning one or more of South Africa's five largest political parties in the 2014 general elections: the ANC, DA, EFF, Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and National Freedom Party (NFP). The articles were sourced from NewsBank Access South Africa, a proprietary online news database (News-

Bank, 2017). Letters to the editor and opinion articles were excluded. Our final corpus consisted of 516 articles.

We searched this corpus for collocates of the five parties’ names. Collocates are words that frequently appear near a particular search term (Brezina et al., 2015). A list of the ten strongest lexical collocations of “ANC” and “DA” is given in Table 1. Grammatical words were excluded from this list, and first names and surnames joined together to yield a list of the concepts that were most commonly associated with each party’s name. Further information about this corpus analysis, including technical specifications for calculation of the collocations and the development of the list of strongest lexical collocations, can be found in Siebörger (2018).

Table 1

The ten strongest lexical collocations of “ANC” and “DA” in the corpus.

	ANC collocations	DA collocations
1	Mopani	Jacques Smalle
2	Zizi Kodwa	Solly Msimanga
3	clash	shadow
4	wearing (T-shirts)	Michael Mkhari
5	Gwede (Mantashe)	(parliamentary leader) Mmusi Maimane
6	league	Helen Zille
7	(Nocks) Seabi	leader
8	(Paul) Mashatile	donated
9	faction	MP
10	veterans	led

A key theme in the ANC collocations is conflict, reflected especially in the collocates “clash” and “faction”. By contrast, a key theme in the DA collocations is leadership, reflected in the instances of “leader” and “led”. We planned to select for fine-grained analysis one article that exemplified each party’s positioning in relation to other parties. As a result, we decided to select the article in the corpus that contained the highest number of collocations with each party’s name in the corpus, while mentioning other parties as well. One article in the corpus, “2 hurt in ANC scuffle” (19 January 2015), contains three of the strongest ten lexical collocations of “ANC”. However, this article did not mention another political party. The article “ANC and DA clash!” (29 January 2015, reprinted in Appendix A) features examples of two collocations with the ANC: the collocation with “clash”, which illustrates the theme of conflict, and the collocation with “wearing”, which in turn collocates strongly with “T-shirts” in phrases like “wearing ANC T-shirts”. Thus, it was selected for fine-grained analysis.

A different news article was selected to exemplify the strongest collocations with “DA” (see our analysis of this article in Siebörger & Adendorff, 2023b).

Two questions guided our analysis:

1. What organizing principles lie behind the grouping of policy positions and moral evaluations with the ANC and DA in this article, in the light of South Africa’s socio-political context?
2. What are the implications of the response to question 1 for the transformation of political discourses in South African public spheres?

Fine-grained analysis of sample article: “ANC and DA clash!”

The action described in this article took place in Bethlehem, Free State, a town with a population of around 60,000 people (Frith, 2011), the seat of the Dihlabeng Local Municipality. In the article, two DA politicians allege that they were assaulted by a group of ANC municipal councillors while trying to video-record an ANC convoy that was led by four municipal traffic vehicles, which they believe were being misused for party political purposes.

Two constellations are evident in the article: one associated with the ANC and one with the DA. Many more signifiers are associated with the ANC than with the DA, and most of the signifiers associated with the ANC are negatively charged. In contrast, those associated with the DA are charged positively, negatively, and neutrally. These two constellations are depicted in Table 2. In the account below, we describe how axiological-semantic density fluctuates throughout the article using a semantic profile and then explain how axiological charging takes place over the course of the article.

Semantic profile

Figure 2 shows a semantic profile of the changes in axiological-semantic density (ASD) in the article. On this profile, words were assigned different strengths of ASD using an analytic tool known as a translation device, developed specifically for this research. Siebörger and Adendorff (2023a) describe this translation device in detail. This semantic profile shows that simple statements of the time and place at which the incident occurred, such as “in Bethlehem on Tuesday” (par. 5), enact the weakest ASD and so are positioned lower in the profile. The strongest ASD is exhibited in hyper-charged phrases which condense various actions that are described in the article, namely “clash” (headline), “apparent political slap-fest” (par. 5), “assaulted” (par. 12), “abuse” (par. 14), and “the allegations” (par. 16), and so are positioned near the top of the profile.

Open section: "ANC and DA clash!"

Table 2

Constellations in "ANC and DA clash!"

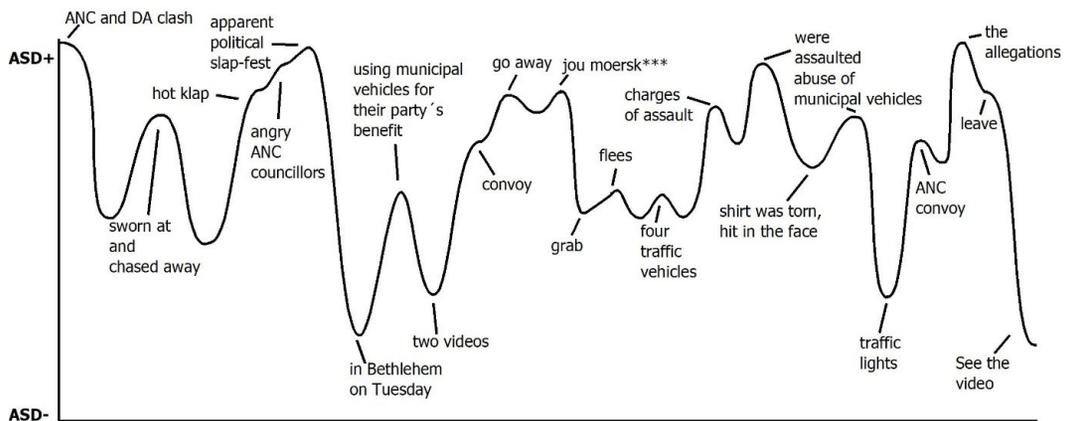
ANC	DA
clash	clash
rival	rival
ANC councillors	DA councillors
	DA members
sworn at	were trying to make a video of the ANC convoy
chased away	
more than can be seen on screen	
hot klap	
one of their members' shirt was torn	
pushed away	
angry	
by-election campaign	
convoy	
using municipal vehicles for their party's benefit	
about four traffic vehicles leading the convoy	
a man wearing an ANC T-shirt	
asking a DA member to go away	
Another woman in blue jeans and an ANC shirt	'Why are you doing this?'
Another one	
says, 'Jou moerskont' (your mother's c***)	'Jou moerskont' (your mother's c***)
another woman	
tries to grab the cellphone	flees
about four traffic vehicles can be seen leading the ANC's convoy	
charges of assault	
councillors of the ANC caucus in the Dihlabeng Local Municipality	MPL Roy Jankielsohn
	Councillor Dulandi Leach
shirt was torn	
hit in the face	
abuse of municipal vehicles for party political purposes	intentions were to investigate the ANC's abuse of municipal vehicles for party political purposes
would have been the right thing to deploy traffic officials to direct rush-hour traffic instead of leading an ANC convoy	

Open section: “ANC and DA clash!”

ANC	DA
councillor and regional election co-ordinator Job Tshabalala	
peacefully	dismissed the allegations

Figure 2

“ANC and DA clash!” semantic profile reflecting fluctuations in axiological-semantic density (ASD)



These signifiers not only condense the axiological charging from preceding paragraphs but also frame the events in a particular way that favours a specific interpretation of them and, hence, a particular type of axiological charging. A “clash” emphasizes violence. In “apparent political slap-fest”, the word “apparent” indicates that the veracity of the reports is not certain, but the neologism “slap-fest” frames the event in a humorous light and may have the effect of trivializing it, suggesting that the politicians were involved in a petty squabble.

“Assault” frames the events in a more severe light in terms of criminality, and the ANC is effectively blamed for this criminality. “Abuse” continues this reference to criminal, or at least immoral, behaviour, delivering a judgement on the use of traffic vehicles in the ANC’s convoy. Finally, “allegations” also comes from the vocabulary of the criminal justice system, but once again implies that the veracity of the reports has not been tested. In this way, the incident reported in this article and the supposed misuse of municipal vehicles that precipitated it is first made light of and then viewed as possible criminal behaviour reflecting negatively on the ANC.

Therefore, this article provides a helpful example of how actions can be condensed into hyper-charged signifiers in a text. The fine-grained description in the following sub-sections shows how each signifier is hyper-charged to allow, in turn, for strong negative charging of the ANC. At the beginning of each sub-section, text from relevant, numbered

paragraphs of the article is quoted, and then the charging of a signifier in that text is described. The full text of the article may be found in Appendix A.

"Clash"

ANC AND DA CLASH!

1 A CLASH between rival ANC and DA councillors has been videotaped.

The two central signifiers of the constellations, "ANC" and "DA", are both named in the headline, "ANC and DA clash!". The word "clash" in this headline denotes that both are involved in the conflict, so it condenses negative charging into both constellations.

This word is repeated in the article's lead (para. 1) and becomes a cover term to refer to what happened in the incident described in the report.

The lead (para. 1) unpacks the headline slightly, mentioning "ANC", "DA", and "clash" together in the same phrase. The word "clash" again charges both "ANC" and "DA" negatively. Apart from this, because meanings are unpacked somewhat in the lead, ASD is weaker than in the headline.

"Apparent political slap-fest"

4 They claimed they were also given a hot klap and one of their member's shirt was torn when they were pushed away by angry ANC councillors.

5 The apparent political slap-fest happened in Bethlehem on Tuesday during an ANC by-election campaign.

Paragraph 4 reports the DA members' claims of physical violence in this incident. Here, "a hot klap" and "torn", referring to one of the DA members' shirts, are used to charge the ANC constellation negatively. The word "klap" is a colloquial South African English word borrowed from Afrikaans, which can be loosely translated as "smack". "Pushed away" and "angry" are also added to the ANC's constellation as examples of negative charging. The phrase "pushed away" echoes "chased away" in paragraph 2. Several synonyms of this phrase are used in the article, and all seem to charge the ANC negatively. Thus, paragraph 4 functions to condense violent actions into the ANC's constellation and so enacts strengthening ASD.

The phrase "the apparent political slap-fest" in paragraph 5 refers to the information revealed in the previous paragraph and condenses it into one rather flippant phrase. The word "apparent" functions similarly to "claimed" in the last paragraph. It indicates that the presence of the violence has not been confirmed and thereby weakens the ASD of the phrase somewhat. In this paragraph, no one is given responsibility for "the apparent political slap-fest", so it is not associated directly with one constellation.

"Assault"

11 DA members say they are going to lay charges of assault today.

12 DA MPL Roy Jankielsohn said: "Councillor Dulandi Leach and I were assaulted by councillors of the ANC caucus in the Dihlabeng Local Municipality.

13 "My shirt was torn and she was hit in the face."

In these paragraphs, a DA member, Jankielsohn, is quoted, giving him plenty of room to condense negative charges with the ANC. The DA members say they will lay "charges of assault" (para. 11), presumably against the ANC councillors. "Assault" can be interpreted as referring to the reports of violence, including the hitting and tearing of a shirt mentioned in the previous paragraphs, and condensing these into one word. This adds yet another negative meaning to the ANC constellation, which is more explicit than in the last paragraph.

The word "assault" is repeated in Jankielsohn's words in paragraph 12. Jankielsohn names the alleged perpetrators of the assault using a long and unusually formal phrase, "councillors of the ANC caucus in the Dihlabeng Local Municipality". This phrase condenses various epistemic and axiological meanings. It links the alleged perpetrators with the ANC, specifically "the ANC caucus in the Dihlabeng Local Municipality", where Bethlehem is situated and where the by-election occurred. The word "caucus" refers to the party's representatives in the municipality acting together as a group, and so effectively, this whole group is charged negatively.

In paragraph 13, Jankielsohn repeats what is reported in paragraph 4, namely that a shirt was torn and a DA member was hit. However, meanings are added here in that the "victims" of each of these actions are now identified more precisely, and the body location in which Leach was hit is mentioned. The fact that Leach was hit "in the face" adds specifically strong negative charging, as the face is a particularly painful and insulting place on which to be hit.

"Abuse"

14 "Our intentions were to investigate the ANC's abuse of municipal vehicles for party political purposes.

15 "At the time, all traffic lights in Bethlehem were out of order due to load shedding. It would have been the right thing to deploy traffic officials to direct rush-hour traffic instead of leading an ANC convoy," said Jankielsohn.

Here Jankielsohn presents himself and Leach as investigating an instance of corruption, charging themselves positively. However, the negative charging condensed into the ANC's constellation is far stronger. In the phrase "the ANC's abuse of municipal vehicles for party political purposes" (para. 14), various signifiers are brought together to charge the ANC negatively. It condenses references to the use of the vehicles, described in paragraphs 6, 7,

and 9, into the term "abuse". The "abuse" is presupposed, leaving no room for this allegation to be questioned. This strengthens the extent to which "abuse" charges the ANC negatively and makes it another example of a signifier that condenses meanings from previous paragraphs. "Municipal vehicles" are also constellated with the ANC, strengthening the allegations of wrongdoing.

Jankielsohn unpacks "the ANC's abuse of municipal vehicles for party political purposes" in paragraph 15. He adds contextual information demonstrating how much municipal traffic vehicles were needed elsewhere in the town. This information is relatively weak in ASD apart from the expression "load shedding", referring to rotational power blackouts that were a strongly negatively charged signifier of the incapacity of Eskom, the country's electricity utility. Jankielsohn mentions a course of action that "would have been the right thing" in these circumstances and says that the traffic vehicles were used to lead the ANC convoy despite this. Here, "the right thing" gives strong positive charging to his suggested course of action and by inference, strong negative charging to the ANC for not following this. "The right thing", "traffic officials", and "the ANC convoy" are linked together in one clause, compounding the strong negative charging of the ANC constellation.

"Allegations"

16 ANC councillor and regional election co-ordinator Job Tshabalala dismissed the allegations and said all they did was peacefully ask the DA members to leave their event.

The ANC's response to the DA's allegations appears at the end of the article. The word "allegations" condenses paragraphs 3-4 and 11-15 of the report into one word and so carries extremely strong ASD. Most of the ANC's response is also condensed into a single word, "dismissed", an instance of relatively strong negative charging. This brief response could signal that the ANC does not deem the allegations serious enough to pay more attention to.

Tshabalala's alternative version of events is commensurately short: "all they did was peacefully ask the DA members to leave their event". Here, "peacefully" concentrates positive charging into the ANC constellation. "Their event" arguably condenses stronger negative charging into the DA's constellation, insinuating that the DA members were trespassing on ANC territory. However, "ask ... to leave" is reminiscent of "chased away" (para. 2), "pushed away" (para. 4), and "go away" (para. 7), and so may reinforce the negative charging of the ANC constellation that has already been established using these words.

Conclusion: Cosmologies and implications for strengthening South African public spheres

LCT aids us in identifying the cosmologies underlying the political knowledge built in this article. In this section, we describe these cosmologies in response to research question 1. Following this, we offer recommendations for strengthening democratic public sphere discussions in South Africa based on this study, addressing research question 2.

Coverage of political parties in this incident addresses concrete actions taken in a physical "clash" between two parties. Even when the causes of the incident are discussed, these relate to tangible things like traffic vehicles and are not linked to broader policy debates. No space is given for more abstract reflection on what the ANC and DA's policy directions are.

Maton borrows Gellner's description of ideology as "a system of ideas with a powerful sex appeal" (1959, p. 2, quoted in Maton 2014, p. 152) and defines a cosmology as what gives systems of ideas their "sex appeal". What has "sex appeal" in this article, or what is used to attract readers, is the violence of the confrontation between the two parties, not policy differences or reasoned inter-party debate. This, in turn, does not provide much fuel for public sphere discussions on parties' policy directions; instead, the kind of public sphere discussions that such an article could stimulate would only give (mostly negative) moral judgements on the party members' behaviour.

The negative charging of the ANC and the fact that the DA is not unambiguously positively charged may draw on and feed cynicism towards politicians among the *Daily Sun's* readers. Based on the findings presented in this article and our broader research on the *Daily Sun* (see Siebörger, 2018; Siebörger & Adendorff, 2023a, 2023b), the newspaper shows bias against all established political parties; in fact, its positioning could be summarized using the slogan "Politicians are trash". This article could be said to be characteristic of Barnett's "age of contempt" (2002, p. 405), in which politicians are depicted as pathologically dishonest at best and lowlifes at worst. It perpetuates the stereotype of politics as a dirty game.

In such a putative cosmology, violence between parties is what is used to attract readers to political reporting. This may have the effect of deepening distrust in political processes. If politicians are portrayed as resorting to violence to settle disputes, there is little reason to trust them to exercise sound leadership in political processes. To compound this, readers have little reason to trust political processes or engage in public sphere discussions about them instead of seeking other ways of making their needs known to those in power. Thus, articles such as this may have a stultifying effect on public sphere engagement.

This does not mean, however, that tabloids like the *Daily Sun* cannot facilitate vibrant alternative public spheres. We argue in section 2 that the *Daily Sun* already fulfils this

function. However, political news articles can also serve as better fuel for discussions on social media, at street corners, and other places where tabloids are read and discussed.

While we argue that overly negative reporting of political parties and politicians may be inimical to the development of vibrant alternative public spheres, the opposite type of reporting, a kind of "sunshine journalism" that only describes positive developments or is sympathetic towards one political party or another, may be equally damaging, especially in an era of increased scepticism about the truth of media content. A notable South African example of the failure of such an approach is *The New Age*, a newspaper which was eventually closed in June 2018 (Anderson, 2018). Readers and advertisers distanced themselves from *The New Age* partly due to its association with former president Jacob Zuma and the Gupta family, accused of various corrupt relationships with the state. The newspaper's closure demonstrates that South African readers tend to be sceptical of publications overtly slanted towards one political orientation or another.

The media need to be realistic in their portrayal of South African political developments or run the risk that readers from any part of the socio-economic spectrum will reject them. Furthermore, political reporting that is overtly partisan merely promotes one of the existing bundles of policy options espoused by South Africa's politicians. This does little or nothing to open dialogic space for alternative views to be represented or engaged with.

In the remainder of this section, we suggest some things that the news media, particularly tabloids, can do to facilitate public-sphere discussions in a way that is inclusive of diverse views and transformative, whether these tabloids appear in print or in an online-only format, as is the case of the *Daily Sun* from 2024 onwards. Firstly, tabloids are reputed to report on political events only when they are perceived to have a direct impact on readers' lives, such as successes and failures in government service delivery, particularly to working-class townships and rural areas, or economic decisions that affect the prices of commodities that their readers often need to use (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). One way they can support better public-sphere discussions is by expanding on this trend by broadening the range of political events they cover and showing how these events are relevant to their readers' lives. This would be fruitful, especially regarding parties' policy decisions.

Secondly, tabloids specialize in the unexpected, and this tendency can be exploited to broaden coverage of policy developments. Tabloids' preoccupation with the unexpected may be one reason behind the fact that the *Daily Sun* often carries stories of local politicians doing good deeds for the community, like raising funds for a poor elderly person's funeral or donating shoes to a school (as shown in Siebörger, 2018, p. 194). These stories help to show that politicians are not uniformly as hypocritical and corrupt as they are made out to be in other parts of the tabloid's political coverage, but they do not necessarily reflect on their policy decisions. Thus, one way for tabloids to extend their coverage of policy decisions would be for them to highlight unexpected policy developments.

Thirdly, tabloids can foster dialogue by running campaigns on topical political issues. Such drives could be fruitful in generating public discussions about various political matters. For example, as land reform, including expropriation without compensation, is being hotly debated in South Africa (Akinola, 2020), a tabloid could have a beneficial and rich campaign centred on this topic, reporting the different opinions on the matter, and highlighting various considerations that influence it. This could fuel better-informed discussions in the alternative public spheres facilitated by the tabloids. It would better equip readers to form their own views, evaluate different parties’ stances, and engage in activism that could influence these parties’ positions.

This is particularly pertinent to complex and emotive topics debated in present-day South Africa, such as land reform or the introduction of national health insurance (Nicol et al., 2021): Both individuals’ feelings on the topic (axiology) and matters of fact, as well as practical considerations (epistemology), could be reported on in a way that promotes understanding of various sides of the argument and civil engagement between them.

We have shown how political reporting in tabloids like the *Daily Sun* can create hyper-charged negative expressions, which are then associated with politicians or parties to portray them as worthy of moral disapprobation. However, it is tabloids’ very capacity to excite readers’ emotions in ways like this that has the potential to make them better facilitators of public-sphere dialogue, particularly in a “post-truth” context where emotions and political stances are held to trump facts. If readers can be engaged on an emotional and rational level in discussions around the significant, complex problems that South Africa faces, such as those that contributed to the widespread unrest of July 2021, then tabloids can make a very significant contribution to the country’s development as a democracy.

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Appendix A: “ANC and DA clash!”

ANC AND DA CLASH! (*Daily Sun*, 29 January 2015)

Kabelo Tlhabanelo

1. A CLASH between rival ANC and DA councillors has been videotaped.
2. The video shows DA councillors being sworn at and chased away by ANC councillors.
3. But DA members claim there is more than can be seen on screen.
4. They claimed they were also given a hot klap and one of their member’s shirt was torn when they were pushed away by angry ANC councillors.
5. The apparent political slap-fest happened in Bethlehem on Tuesday during an ANC by-election campaign.
6. The DA members were trying to make a video of the ANC convoy, claiming the ruling party was using municipal vehicles for their party’s benefit.
7. Daily Sun is in possession of two videos that show the convoy of hooting cars and about four traffic vehicles leading the convoy. In the one minute and 10 second-long video, a man wearing an ANC shirt is seen in a white Toyota bakkie asking a DA member to go away.

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8. Another woman in blue jeans and an ANC shirt says: "Why are you doing this?", while another one says, "Jou moerskont" (your mother's c***).
9. Suddenly another woman appears and tries to grab the cellphone but the DA member gets inside a car and flees.
10. In another 30-second video, about four traffic vehicles can be seen leading the ANC's convoy.
11. DA members say they are going to lay charges of assault today.
12. DA MPL Roy Jankielsohn said: "Councillor Dulandi Leach and I were assaulted by councillors of the ANC caucus in the Dihlabeng Local Municipality.
13. "My shirt was torn and she was hit in the face.
14. "Our intentions were to investigate the ANC's abuse of municipal vehicles for party political purposes.
15. "At the time, all traffic lights in Bethlehem were out of order due to load shedding. It would have been the right thing to deploy traffic officials to direct rush-hour traffic instead of leading an ANC convoy," said Jankielsohn.
16. ANC councillor and regional election co-ordinator Job Tshabalala dismissed the allegations and said all they did was peacefully ask the DA members to leave their event.
17. See the video on www.dailysun.co.za/multimedia