

Fake-talk and the Spaza Shop

A Fake Food Furore and the Spectre of Public Health Emergencies in South Africa

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Abstract

At the end of August 2018, a controversy erupted in South Africa. Accusations of potentially poisonous ‘fake food’ had been circulating on social media for a month or so, and by early September reports were common on South African news programmes. Accusations fell at the door of foreign-run *spaza* shops (convenience stores), some of which were looted and their shopkeepers harmed. Many commentators read these events as another outbreak of the xenophobic violence that has flared up across South African townships for more than a decade. Our reading is different. In this Research Article, rather than dismissing accusations of fake-ness as merely a pretext for popular protest and violence, we tackle the question of what work ‘fake-talk’ does. We show that in this instance, accusations of fake-ness brought a distinctive urgency to events, framing what might otherwise have been seen as concerns about inequality in the language of a public health crisis. In response, a state normally hesitant to act on citizens’ long-standing complaints about ‘the duplicity of foreigners’ intervened with a new speed and decisiveness. ‘Fake-talk’, we conclude, is an important site of inquiry because of how it may enable certain actions, regardless of whether suspicions are founded.

Keywords

Fake food, Protest, Health emergency, South Africa, Xenophobia.

Introduction

In late August 2018, a set of concerns that had been simmering on social media platforms such as YouTube and Twitter boiled over into South Africa's mainstream media. As part of its evening news coverage, the state television station, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) presented a two-minute news item entitled 'Consumer Council of South Africa wants food shops inspected over fake food' (YouTube, SABC News 2018). Viewers were informed that the state was aware of and concerned about ongoing claims from the public that *spaza* shops—small convenience stores that serve South African townships—were selling potentially poisonous 'fake food'.

The story was presented in the style of investigative journalism: it opened with images that had been trending on social media, followed by video clips of shopkeepers denying any wrongdoing and then video clips of people hastily dumping bright pink liquid out of containers apparently behind these shops. However, instead of SABC journalists leading the investigation, the story cast ordinary shoppers in the role of Sherlock Holmes. One shopper confronted a shopkeeper with what he claimed were 'clearly fake' goods, holding an 'authentic' bottle of clear tonic water bottle in one hand and a 'fake' bottle of tonic water—discoloured and mislabelled—in the other. Off-camera, a man exclaimed, 'I've never seen such a colour!' as the camera lingered on the yellow liquid. The camera next took the viewer to a shelf of buttermilk bottles. These bottles were purported to be from a major brand, Inkomazi, but the labels were misspelled as 'Inkomosi'. The story then cut to a talking head from the Consumer Council who assured the news reporter that her organisation was on the job. 'We just need to make a call to the environmental health practitioners and the Department of Health to get their people on the ground because we foresee this becoming something that we can't really contain', she explained. The newscaster reported that SABC had investigated further and found evidence of expired goods in various other foreign-run *spaza* shops. The story wrapped up with an image of a Twitter post showing a bright pink ice lolly with a tiny green leg poking out of it—a leg that looked as though it might belong to an alien species or perhaps a small frog. The newscaster intoned: 'Major risks to consumers' health? Government needs to put stringent measures in place to assure compliance' (YouTube, SABC News 2018).

In mentioning 'something that we can't really contain', the Consumer Council spokeswoman anticipated events that soon engulfed the *spaza* shop scene. Alongside intensified social media activity, people started to demonstrate outside foreign-run *spaza* shops, complaining that they were being sold potentially life-threatening fake food. Before long, these demonstrations became violent. Shopkeepers were threatened and, in some instances, shops were looted.

This unrest spawned a variety of different, yet interconnected, responses from both the public and the state. On social media platforms like Twitter, the wider public called out the hypocrisy of looters stealing the very same ‘poisonous’ goods that were the object of protest.¹ The state in turn responded to the unrest through ordering local police intervention, who soon set about quelling the violence (Shange 2018). But the unusual, direct intervention of South Africa’s health minister, who dispatched a small army of state health inspectors, saw the start of a very different response. These health inspectors visited nearly 500 *spaza* shops across South Africa, where they took samples and carried out tests to investigate the extent and danger of fake food to township residents. Around 100 shops were closed as a result of this state action (Child 2018). In a further unexpected twist, the health minister took to the airwaves a few days later to make an official announcement: the inspectors had found that the food was, in fact, authentic and safe. In a final twist, instead of cracking down on ‘fake food’ the minister announced a different kind of crack-down: one on immigration violations. The inspectors had discovered that some shopkeepers lacked proper documentation (such as business licenses) while others lacked the immigration documentation needed to be in South Africa (Ibid.). As deportation proceedings were announced the violence began to peter out, as though the protestors had been vindicated by the appearance of the state health inspectors and the fruits of their labour.

For many South African observers, this episode seemed very familiar. Since the early 2000s, protests and violence around foreign-run *spaza* shops have become a routine, if alarming, part of township life (Dassah 2015; Gastrow 2018; Landau 2012; Steinberg 2018). When violence is deemed ‘xenophobic’, the state’s response is normally to deploy the local police to quell the violence—to suppress, rather than to resolve, popular grievances. In short, scholars have found that outbreaks of xenophobic violence work to repel the state rather than draw it in (Mottiar and Bond 2012).

What concerns us here are the less familiar twists in the tale: first, the ministerial-level intervention of the state, appearing to take seriously the complaints of township publics; and second, the simultaneous willingness of these same township publics to loot the very food that their communities were accusing of being fake and dangerous. What accounts for this? To somewhat anticipate our argument, we suggest that thinking with what we call ‘fake-talk’—accusations and voiced concerns about fake-ness—allows us to unravel the curious elements of ‘The Case of the Fake Food’. As other work in this special section demonstrates, fake-talk is special because it has the ability to connect the otherwise unconnected, even if only temporarily (Hornberger and Hodges, this issue). Here, through the

1 Source has been erased from the internet since then.

incantatory power of fake-talk, the apparent semiotics of popular xenophobia morphed, unexpectedly and almost arbitrarily, into a potential public health crisis. And by rendering it a public health crisis, new possibilities for state intervention became available. This crisis narrative allowed the broader context—large-scale unemployment and inequality—to fall from view. In its place, visible and decisive state intervention appeared in a performance of serving the South African people. This case also illustrates how, in connecting the unconnected, fake-talk can thrive without, rather than because of, evidence. As our analysis of social media material from this episode will show, fake-talk’s mode of expression is one of performing evidence—of evidentiality.

We draw here on the linguistic concept of evidentiality and expand upon it. In linguistics, ‘evidentiality’ refers to grammatical or lexical devices that in and of themselves indicate the presence of evidence (e.g., ‘allegedly ...’) (Aikhenvald and Dixon 2003). We build on this concept to characterise a certain performative mode found in popular culture, a kind of mash-up of crime forensics shows and cooking shows, that suggests the existence of evidence. Taken together, these insights show how, in fake-talk’s facility for connection, a space is created where longstanding intractable concerns can draw attention in new ways and thus be heard.

The scene of the scandal: *Spaza* shops

That the fake food furore transpired in and around *spaza* shops is no coincidence. Although these informal shops may appear of little consequence, they are nodal points of great social and political significance. They are small shops—that also usually function as their shopkeepers’ dwellings—where township residents spend the little money they have on basic commodities essential for day-to-day survival. As such, they are arenas in which the everyday plights of township communities play out. The emergence of *spaza* shops dates back to the Apartheid era. At that time, there were few opportunities for black South Africans to gain a license that allowed them to own or operate a business (Spiegel 2003, 213; Southall 1980, 38). In the 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of anti-Apartheid consumer boycotts, *spaza* shops emerged as practical alternatives to white-owned shops and became a symbol of black self-sufficiency. Today, those black South African shopkeepers are celebrated as symbols of early black entrepreneurship and capitalism.

In the 21st century *spaza* shop operations have changed, this once-proud symbol now turned on its head. Many South Africans still own *spaza* shops, but rather than running them themselves they sell or rent them to new entrepreneurs who have migrated from countries like Somalia or Bangladesh (Charman, Petersen, and Piper 2012). Alongside changes in the ethnic and national identities of *spaza*

shopkeepers, the shops now do business differently, offering lower prices and a wider range of commercial services (e.g., offering loans). As such, they have made a definitive break with the boycott beginnings of *spaza* shops. Nevertheless, their new goods and services have proved popular with customers. For our purposes, we wish to draw attention to the way that these more recent changes have also ushered in a new set of powerful economic and social frictions that play out at the *spaza* shop: namely, the widespread criticism that the profits enjoyed by these new shopkeepers have curtailed economic opportunities for the very South Africans they serve.

Spaza shops are also seen as spaces of crime and violence. Since the early 2000s, the occurrence of regular, unpunished violence at these shops has become a new trope for understanding everyday life in townships (Charman and Piper 2012). In the scholarly literature there have been many attempts to understand these changes and account for the emergence of the *spaza* shop as a regular site of violence. Most analyses read such violence as popular expressions of South African xenophobia, alongside the widespread perception that post-Apartheid South Africa has failed to deliver on its promises to its people (Landau 2012; Steinberg 2018, 2015).

We build on this scholarship about *spaza* shops but argue that, in this instance, claims about fake food are central rather than epiphenomenal to the demands of the protesters. Here, we draw on another body of work—one that investigates the food riot (e.g., Thompson 1971; Trapido 2021). This scholarship shows that food riots are expressions of resentment particular to a post-agriculturalist precariat whose members are unable to produce their own food and thus find themselves at the mercy of shopkeepers. When people turn against their local food shops, it is often connected to labour conditions or conditions of dearth and deprivation. In townships, many people are without work or without adequate and secure incomes. As a result, even if the prices are low, people are forced to confront and experience ongoing structural humiliations in and through their interactions with the *spaza* shop. *Spaza* shops, in that sense, function as a shackle that binds township consumers to the chain of global commodity capitalism.

The longer politics and history of food riots underscore the significance of these shops as flashpoints of social tension. Nevertheless, neither the literature on *spaza* shops nor that on food riots accounts for the surprising and decisive appearance of the state in the South African fake food episode. Food riots, according to this literature, take place in the absence rather than the presence of the state (Auyero and Moran 2007). But this was not the case here. Further, the South African state has no remedy for the structural and daily humiliations that the *spaza* shop can throw in its customers' faces. But by investigating the question of the 'fake' in these

fake-food riots, we argue, we can make sense of why the South African state decisively intervened on this occasion. Our point is that we cannot dismiss the effects of these claims of fake-ness, even if, ultimately, the state found no evidence of fake food. Much dwells in claims of fake-ness; they possess a certain charge. We look carefully at what these claims express.

Taking claims of fake-ness seriously

In what follows, we present a selection of some of the most evocative material about the fake food scandal that circulated on social media. As we noted above, news and social media were full of examples like the image of a green leg poking out of an ice-lolly. While perhaps fanciful, such an image gives a clear sense of the register that was regularly mobilised in the social media posts. These included many home videos seeking to show that fake food had infiltrated even the ‘holy trinity’ of foodstuff staples found at the *spaza* shop: eggs, beans, and bread. In the close reading of these videos that follows, we pay particular attention to the semantic mechanics of how claims of fake-ness are made and how they invoke a larger and immediate threat to public health.

Episode One: ‘Fake eggs South Africa. Be careful!!!’

This video (YouTube, WealthBOUND Tfi 2018) styles itself as a hybrid of cooking shows and crime serials like ‘Crime Scene Investigation’. It begins with our host introducing himself and the day’s topic: ‘I am Julius Maloi. You know me, and last week I told you that there is a problem with the eggs that we eat’. Stylishly dressed, he stands in a pine kitchen with a polished countertop in front of him, waving around the butter knife he holds in his hand as he speaks: ‘I was under the suspicion that we are eating fake eggs—we heard about the eggs in Nigeria, they were making fake eggs. I think those eggs are now in South Africa’. Then, in a curious manner that combines presenting a recipe and presenting forensic evidence, Maloi points to a nondescript cardboard carton of a half-dozen eggs and says: ‘I went to the nearest tuck [*spaza*] shop and bought them. After I fried these things [pointing to eggshells], I thought something is very suspicious. So! I went and bought another one [box]’.

Maloi then puts an identical carton next to the first and, raising his voice with conviction—as if saying, ‘Now we will start the experiment’, he intones: ‘From the same shop. Everything is the same—[I do this] not only for you but I also want to convince myself’. Maloi then cracks an egg onto a dinner plate and exclaims: ‘Watch that! Look at the colour of the yolk. Already, it says a lot!’ He repeats: ‘Already, it says a lot!’ He continues, ‘It is discoloured. But in any case, let’s not argue’.

Maloi then moves on to the next step of his apparent experiment in the service of exposing the scam to the viewer. He takes one of the eggshells and pulls out its membrane, more or less in one piece, and exclaims again: 'Look at that! It is thick plastic what they put inside. I don't know how they made it, but there—watch that!' He pulls the membrane showing its elasticity and declares: 'This is rubber! Plastic! So, you think it is only in Nigeria. Here it is in South Africa happening'.

Then, as though presenting a 'control group' of eggs, he shows a large square tray of three dozen eggs, which he explains that he bought for the sake of comparison. He points out the label and then contrasts it by going back to the initial unmarked carton—as though it were Exhibit A—and declares: 'Here you don't even know who you can call, who can take accountability when they sell you rubbish'. After cracking one of the 'control' eggs open, he points out that the yolk is a much darker yellow; he pulls on the membrane and it tears easily. Both are presented as evidence of the labelled eggs' authenticity.

What do we make of this extraordinary yet familiar 'cooking show'/'true crime' home video? The *spaza* shop is presented as the source of the deception. The sign of 'Nigeria' is used to stand in for large networks of duplicity. An authentic, mass-produced commodity should be interchangeable, not have a distinct identity. By giving the eggs an identity they become different from the mass-produced commodity, which opens them up to being seen as fake.

What is striking in this video is how evidentiality is being produced. First, Maloi points out and emphasises difference, a divergence that marks one set of eggs as fake. Further, the use of common genres—the cooking show, crime scene forensics, the elaborate presentation of 'Exhibit A' followed by 'Exhibit B'—suggests that performativity in itself produces a powerful evidential effect. The cooking show speaks directly to its audience; the forensics show gives us the procedure for making a case. We recognise the evidential format, despite the clearly slippery nature of the evidence that is in fact on offer and in which accusations of the fake-ness of these eggs reside.

Episode Two: 'Tembisa woman finds beans instead of fish in a Lucky Star Can bought at a Pakistani shop'

Moving on from this spectacular performance of evidence, we turn to another, more menacing, threat of fake food. This other clip (YouTube, HD News 2018), also circulated on YouTube, is staged as a 'breaking news' story, narrated by a disembodied voice, and delivered in the style of a white, male, anglophone news broadcaster announcing a shocking discovery. The audio is accompanied by a single still-life photograph of three tins sporting Lucky Star Pilchard labels (pilchards are a cheap, tiny fish). The tins are arranged on a plastic tablecloth

adorned with images of white lace, flowers in bloom, and ripe fruits. One of the tins appears to have been roughly cut open, revealing what looks like beans in brine. Two tins remain unopened. The narrator begins:

Tembisa [a greater Johannesburg township] woman finds beans instead of fish in a Lucky Star can bought at a Pakistani *spaza* shop. Sure it never ends when it comes to Pakistani-owned shops. A woman from Tembisa got a surprise when she bought a can of Lucky Star and found beans instead of fish in the cans ... On the discovery that the tins were filled with beans instead of fish, she went back to the Pakistani shop where she purchased the goods hoping to get a refund, but instead she was turned away by the shopkeeper who told her that he is not responsible. She should go to the Lucky Star Fish Company and consult with them. Mrs Matebela then decided to just go back home with the beans and make a beans stew ... because she had no idea of how to get hold of the Lucky Star Fish Company to voice her complaints. 'The beans stew was actually quite delicious, my kids enjoyed it, but the after-effects were horrible because we couldn't stop going to the toilet and our farts smelled like dead rats,' says Mrs Matebela. This is not the first time that Pakistani shops have come under fire selling fake products to consumers. In recent news, Pakistanis were arrested in Marabastad, Pretoria, and Johannesburg for producing fake and unhealthy Coca-Cola.

Like the video about fake eggs, this one also employs a recognisable form of evidentiality: an item on a news broadcast. It draws its authority from this trope, sharing the technique of first-person testimony to underscore its veracity. The story has a twist: imagine expecting one food item and getting something completely different. The trust one has in a known brand and a factory-sealed tin ends up being dashed. A con, a fraud, has been perpetrated. The tale then takes a darker turn. It is not simply that one cheap foodstuff has been replaced by another, cheaper, foodstuff; it also sent her family running to the toilet with a case of food poisoning, referencing the plague-like harbinger of a dead rat. The viewer is invited to criminalise the entire episode, even perhaps recalling the phrase 'I smell a rat!', which connotes deception.

By counterposing the scheming and unaccountable Pakistani shopkeeper against the innocence of the Matebela family, the news-like item both asks and answers the implicit question: 'How could something like this have happened?' The significance of this being a Pakistani-run shop is impossible to miss given this detail's repetition (five times in this short piece). The viewer is told that not only did the Pakistani merchant sell the beans masquerading as pilchards but he also refused to take responsibility for the tins, instead suggesting that it could have been a manufacturing label mix-up. The implication is amplified by the insinuation of

Pakistanis' implication in wider food scam rackets, linking these beans in fish tins to global brands such as Coca-Cola. The marked identity of the Pakistani shopkeeper in the video thus reinforces the claims of fake-ness. Whereas all manufactured goods should, in principle, be identical, interchangeable, and to a degree place-less, it is the locatable category of the merchant and the non-uniform quality of the goods that are taken as evidence of the fake. Suspicion directed at foreignness is mingled with the very real danger of tinned food marked as fake and the cause of digestive problems, and understood as posing a serious threat to public health.

Episode Three: 'Albany Bread is killing South Africans ... fake bread'

Another short video (YouTube, Slick Mash 2018) that also circulated on YouTube casts suspicion on a third item found on a typical *spaza* shopper's list: Albany Bread. This brand of cheap, mass-produced, and standardised bread is commonly eaten at lunchtime, shared among co-workers and washed down with a can of Coke. It is also often a part of children's school lunches, topped with peanut butter or perhaps a slice of polony (bologna). Unlike USA's infamous Wonder Bread, which advertised the additives and preservatives that imparted its wondrous quality of appearing to stay fresh forever, Albany Bread is generally meant to be consumed within a few days of being baked.²

As with the episode of the fake eggs, this video is shot in the kitchen of someone's home, on what looks to be a black marble countertop. The video keeps the same shot throughout, recalling the set-up of the laboratory experiment-cum-cooking show. The speaker holds her recording phone in one hand and shows the viewer the 'evidence' with the other: a pack of Albany Bread and a single slice soaking in a mug of water. She narrates: 'This bread I bought more than two weeks ago at a *spaza* shop *ama*Pakistani.³ It is still fresh. It is still bouncy'. She picks up the loaf of Albany Bread, squeezing it to show how soft it is, and continues:

There is no odour, there is no mould, there is nothing. It is still as I bought it. It seems what they do is by changing *amapacking* [wrappers], and they buy the breads wherever they buy them from in bulk, then they change *amapackage* every week and you think you are buying fresh bread [because of the new label]. But clearly it is not.

She then reaches into the mug with the bread, as though conducting a forensic demonstration. In so doing, she turns a boring, common, cheap, unremarkable

2 Since the Apartheid era, there are minimal legal nutritional requirements for bread (South African Government 1990). The existence of such standards suggests that bread has historically been subject to adulteration and is therefore now carefully regulated.

3 In saying '*ama*Pakistani', the narrator is literally referring to people as things. This is not simply colourful or colloquial language, but is a way of showing deliberate disrespect.

commodity into something that is special, unique, different, and worthy of investigation: 'I kept a slice of bread in this water more than two hours now'. Then, with her well-manicured hand she takes the bread out, showing that it is still intact. With one hand she forms the bread into a small ball, recalling a ball of *pap* or corn porridge, as though she is about to feed herself or perhaps a small child. Of the bread, she tells the viewer: 'It is like a sponge. Look at this,' she says, keeping her camera on the mashed-together bread in her hand for the viewer to examine. She ends by asking, indignantly: 'How is this healthy? How is this safe for our families, our communities, for our children? How do we continue feeding our children this kind of food every day? Guys, we are dying—a slow death!'

It is precisely the unusual quality of staying fresh—or 'bouncy'—over the course of two weeks that gives rise to the narrator's suspicions about the bread's authenticity. She demonstrates the bread's bounciness by staging the video like a home experiment, similar in format to the fake eggs video. By handling the bread for the viewer and showing us that it failed to dissolve—as she implies it should have done, were it proper bread—her home lab yields results: the bread is not okay.

Confident that her presentation of evidence has convinced the viewer, she then moves to seal the deal by offering, Agatha Christie-like, a seemingly watertight explanation: the bread is not what it purports to be on its packaging. Instead, the packaging is authentic but has been smuggled into the hands of criminals who use it to wrap counterfeit bread in. The scam is meant to deceive innocent shoppers into wasting their money on a fake product. The implication is that unscrupulous shopkeepers circumvent regulations governing the manufacture and sale of bread.

Note that all three videos invoke criminal fake food rackets in relation to the figure of the foreigner. Fake eggs are associated with Nigerians. For both the beans in fish tins and the Albany Bread, it is the Pakistani shopkeeper. Here, the speaker's disregard for the shopkeeper is exemplified through her language, in how she refers to shopkeepers as things rather than as people ('*ama*Pakistani'). In all the videos, the foreigner stands in to give the otherwise 'anonymous' mass-produced commodity an origin, even a foreign origin. 'Proving' that the bread is different, the speaker bestows upon it an originality it should not have were it to pass as an 'authentic' mass-produced commodity. This originality marks it as fake.

What really stands out in this last video, particularly for our purposes in this article, is that the speaker is not simply declaring herself an individual victim. Rather, she is speaking out in the name of the people. She despairs that this bread is unsafe for 'our families, our communities, for our children'. Her final pronouncement that 'we are dying a slow death!' is a declaration of a public health emergency.

Performance, evidentiality, and public health

We wish to draw attention here to the question of evidence—or, to be more specific, the performance of evidentiality—on display in each of our three examples. The claims about fake-ness are produced not so much through presenting facts but through performing evidence. By deploying popular and familiar modes of entertainment—the cooking show, the forensic crime show, the news broadcast, the detective story—spectacles are performed and truth claims produced. While it is far from clear just what caused the eggs to have pale yellow yolks, why the beans were in a can labelled as pilchards, or what state a slice of bread should be in after soaking in a mug of water, the evidentiality of these performances conjures ‘genuine fakes’ into being and frames the foreign shopkeeper as the fraudster. The performance of evidentiality succeeds not only because the videos rely on familiar scripts, but also because they tap into an equally familiar logic: that of the mass-produced commodity. A commodity that becomes singular by standing out as a character in the crime drama ceases to be an interchangeable product. The implicit guarantee of its quality becomes spoilt. It can only be a fake.

In the same vein, claims about the effects of fake food set up these staple foodstuffs as a public health crisis-in-the-making. Each of the videos acts like a public health announcement. The first tells a cautionary tale to consumers to beware of purchasing unlabelled eggs. The beans-masquerading-as-pilchards ups the ante, warning that even brand-name labels do not provide protection from food poisoning. Finally, the third declares a public health emergency based on bread that refuses to spoil. These instances are not simply presented as scams to be avoided. Instead, they warn that fake food is posing a threat to the health of the South African public. This lies at the crux of our analysis. Earlier, we asked what distinguishes the violence resulting from the fake food scandal centred on *spaza* shops from a food riot or xenophobic mob. Our answer lies in the public health emergency, or the threat thereof, that is at the heart of the alarm that each video seeks to sound. When such warnings are circulated on social media platforms—particularly with such sensationalist trappings—they perform a potent call to state action.

‘Lol listeriosis says hello’: The state comes to call

Some media outlets scorned the fake-food claims and dismissed them as simply a ‘hoax’ (Knowler 2018). So why was the state compelled to intervene? In the first months of 2018 a discussion on the fake-food scandal emerged in the social media platform Twitter, where Twitter users crowd-sourced suggestions about which shops to avoid. One of the many such tweets, from 26 April 2019, by Twitter user @WoongaBoy read as this: ‘Lol listeriosis says hello’.

What was this 'listeriosis says hello' about? The tweet brings into the picture a crucial piece of information to contextualise our analysis. In 2018, when the 'fake food' scandal erupted, people's minds were fresh with the memory of a recent and deadly outbreak of listeriosis in South Africa. Listeriosis, a disease caused by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*, is one of the most common deadly forms of food poisoning and frequently associated with cured foods such as meats or smoked fish. In this instance it was found in polony, a cheap processed meat regularly consumed by the working poor. This crisis was at its height between January and March 2017, but it was not officially declared over until October 2018 (National Institute for Communicable Diseases 2018). In total, 216 people died as a result of this outbreak (Whitworth 2020). So, when @WoongaBoy tweeted, 'Lol listeriosis says hello' in response to media coverage of the fake-food scandal, they were making a connection between the recent listeriosis public health crisis and the current outcry about fake food, reminding readers that food can be deadly.

The specifics of polony matter here, because it is a foodstuff for those who can just about afford meat but only cheap and processed cuts. Like the eggs, tinned fish, and Albany Bread, it is a staple of the working poor. Also of relevance to our story is those whose lives the listeriosis outbreak claimed: of the 216 victims, some women suffered doubly because listeriosis can also cause spontaneous miscarriage. Looking at the fake-food scandal in the context of the aftermath of the listeriosis crisis, we can see two through-lines: the position of the default *spaza* shop customer as innocent victim and the existential threat to the South African body politic posed by bad food. Recalling the narrator's cry in the finale about Albany Bread: 'Guys, they are killing our children!'

Nevertheless, there are important differences in the sites and registers through which the respective scandals of listeriosis and fake food unfolded. Whereas the *spaza* shop is a small convenience store catering to township communities, it was South Africa's biggest food company and an international player, Tiger Brands, that had manufactured and distributed the deadly polony at the heart of the listeriosis outbreak. This became clear as a result of a massive operation by the South African state as it attempted to get a grip on the crisis. *Business Insider*, an online business news site, reported that 'a veritable army descended on the [Tiger Brands warehouse] ... to collect samples there: [this included] representatives of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, three foreign advisors from the World Health Organisation, and government inspectors from two different departments' (Business Insider 2018).

In order to co-ordinate the massive multi-agency response, the government also set up a Public Health Emergency Co-ordinating Committee and a Multi-Sectoral National Outbreak Response Team (Tralac 2018). As a result of this policing

operation, Tiger Brands was forced to announce major recalls of many of its products, not only polony. Its distribution and export licenses were also suspended for some time, which led to massive financial losses for the company (Ibid.).

The listeriosis crisis provides both an immediate context as well as an analytical model through which we can read the *spaza* shop fake-food furore. What we argue here is that when people subsequently called out ‘fake food!’—something the state was primed to be attentive to—it brought together the urgency of public health and the more every-day matter of protests and violence targeted at foreign-run *spaza* shops. Once a public health threat became attached to the problem of fake food, the state responded in a way that was above and beyond the typical deployment of local police to quell township unrest. The state treated *spaza* shops and their foreign entrepreneurs as though they posed the same sort of existential threat to the state as had the big brand-name food manufacturer involved in the listeriosis outbreak. The state also treated the protesters’ complaints as though they carried the same gravitas as the first deaths had in the listeriosis outbreak. Rather than seeing them as evidence of community tensions, public health officials took these complaints as an early warning of mortal danger.

The state’s response to listeriosis showed that once the enemy has been defined as a type of bacteria (*Listeria monocytogenes*) and explained as a public health crisis caused by an infectious agent, it confidently used its muscle to fight it. Had the problem been identified as mass-produced food and the structural inequalities it both thrives on and reproduces, the state’s response, we suggest, would have been ‘business as usual’. In other words, framing listeriosis as a public health crisis invoked the corollary of, and self-evident requirement for, an urgent and immediate response and meant that all the interventions that a humanitarian emergency sanctions could be deployed (Calhoun 2004, 375–6). Similarly, in the *spaza* shop furore, once claims of fake food were rendered a public health crisis rather than evidence of tensions arising from xenophobia and unemployment, another kind of state action was possible to imagine—one both for the public to call for and for the state to enact.

Cracking the case: Fake-talk

Here, let us go through our analysis of how fake food could be so convincingly connected to a public health crisis. Our unpacking of the YouTube videos reveals no conclusive evidence of the fake-ness of the various food items; rather, the videos themselves *perform* evidence and mark the apparently interchangeable commodity as different and thus as fake. In other words, what is on offer in these videos is not evidence but evidentiality; not the *presence* of evidence but the *suggestion* of evidence. Evidentiality matters, because through it the fake-ness of

food is deemed to be ‘proven’. From this proof-effect emerges the real sense of a looming danger from a potential threat to health. As such, the entire series of accusations of fake food at *spaza* shops in 2018 was able to assume the patina of an imminent public health crisis.

This was the case as much for the tweeting public as it was for the state. Both shared a recent referent in the deadly listeriosis crisis. Thus, when the public demanded state action the state felt authorised to activate its full powers to prevent another, similar, calamity. It did not matter that there was no conclusive evidence of fake or dangerous food, as either captured on social media or uncovered by the state during its inspections of *spaza* shop wares.

Perhaps inadvertently, the state’s intervention effectively redressed the common complaint that foreigners pose a threat to the South African body politic through their very presence and economic activity. Rarely does this complaint from the working poor get attention from the state; under normal circumstances, it tends to be dismissed as ‘mere xenophobia’. And yet, in this case, a complaint about inequality and poverty, once re-cast as a public health emergency, ended up energising the state. Here then, we see how fake-talk connected—and cathected—matters of xenophobia and of public health. While it is not uncommon for metaphors to link foreigners with sickness (for example, references to foreigners as ‘contaminants’ or people who spread contagion), what fake-talk produced in the case of the *spaza* shop was a radically concrete intimacy between xenophobia and public health, in which one replaced (or was collapsed into) the other.

While the above may explain the riddle of why the state intervened so quickly and decisively in this episode of *spaza* shop violence, where does it leave our second riddle, the curious case of people looting the very same food decried as fake? As we will show, this second riddle allows us to put our analysis of fake-talk to the test. The looting was seen as a contradiction by onlookers who tweeted about the protests. It was also called out by an elected official who, in trying to calm the situation, reprimanded people thus: ‘You can’t loot a shop where you claim people are selling expired or fake goods, because you are looting poison’ (Matiwane 2018).

Let us linger on this official’s observation for a moment. He had travelled to a *spaza* shop in Soweto, in the wake of looting, to calm the situation. However, his call for calm illuminates a pre-existing understanding of what an ‘ordinary’ looting of *spaza* shops looks like. This is to say, ‘ordinary’ *spaza* shop violence is assumed to be fuelled by xenophobic sentiment couched in a language of economic justice. By calling out the apparent contradiction of people looting the very ‘poison’ they had decried, the official underestimated the power of the accusation of fake-ness. He

spoke as if calling out the contradiction would convince people to calm down. But this was a misreading of the situation, brought about by collapsing the ‘problem’ into a question: ‘Is there fake food or not?’

If, however, we take seriously what fake-talk does, the contradiction immediately dissolves. Fake food did not need to be ‘really fake’ to elicit state intervention. Accusations of fake food were enough to evoke the urgency of a health crisis. Simply putting on a show of accusations, couched in evidentiality and articulated in a register of outrage, spurred the state into action. Charges of fake-ness can evoke danger and make a noise by catching the wind, energy, and affect of other health crises such as the listeriosis outbreak, where there was no popular protest but much action by the state. This is the logic and praxis of fake-talk as a call to action.

‘We will necklace you’, or, what happened next

Such is the power of fake-talk that with it, long-standing disgruntlement with foreign-run *spaza* shops has gained a new idiom. Accusing shopkeepers of selling fake food has now become a common way of intimidating foreigners. This was brought home to us when one of us observed how the 2018 fake food episode had left its own traces. We include an extensive entry from Chitukutuku’s field notes from February 2020 on the occasion of a flare-up of xenophobic violence in his neighbourhood:

From our balcony I witnessed people approaching a Cameroonian who owned a *spaza* shop opposite our complex and threatened to loot his shop. We could hear one woman saying, ‘Here is another Nigerian’, to which he responded saying, ‘No, I am Cameroonian’. The woman said, ‘*liyafana*’ [You are the same]. When the police intervened and stopped people from attacking his *spaza* shop, one of the mob leaders said, ‘They sell fake food, these people’. Many present supported this claim, including people I have seen buying food from the shop before and after the confrontation. The following morning, when I went to buy bread from the *spaza* shop, one of the protesters came to buy cigarettes at that very *spaza*. She told the Cameroonian *spaza* shop owner, ‘Don’t worry my friend—what happened yesterday is over, we know you don’t sell fake food; we were just angry. In this country if you sell dangerous things like fake food and drugs we don’t call the police. We will necklace you’.

What can be said about this arresting series of events? The profiling of foreignness, the attempt to justify the harassment to the police, the admission that the accusations were unfounded, the threat of extrajudicial violence. The woman buying cigarettes says, ‘we don’t call the police’ and threatens that ‘we will necklace you’, meaning put a car tyre over a person’s head, set it on fire, and

watch them burn to death in the street. Here, her logic legitimates retribution, creating an equivalence between the murderous consequences of fake food and the murderous vigilantes' understanding of self-protection.

This field note shows not only that 'fake food' has become an everyday idiom for abusing *spaza* shopkeepers, but also that popular belief in the possibility of fake food endures. The woman buying cigarettes tacitly acknowledges that there is normally no requirement for evidence, or even belief in the 'truth', of *spaza* shops selling fake food. But once given wings, such a belief can tip over into violence against shopkeepers. Further, the accusation of fake food could be taken as an invitation to the police to start policing not just unrest but health too. The spectre of fake food taps into an infinite register of urgency. To invoke it has the potential to escalate any situation, outstripping whatever dangers may or may not have been identified. In this setting, the accusation of 'fake food' is like a smouldering ember that can spark back into flame with the slightest bit of fuel.

Conclusion: The work of fake-talk

We began this article by narrating the curious case of fake food and the *spaza* shop furore, drawing attention to two puzzles: why did the state intervene and why would people loot the very food they decried as fake and poisonous? We then explored the scholarly literature on *spaza* shop violence, but found it insufficient for understanding the violence in this case because it failed to account for the unusually decisive action by the state. Nor did it give us the tools to analyse the significance of food itself in the episode. As a result, we turned next to the literature on food riots. This helped us understand how *spaza* shops function as spaces of humiliation. They perform everyday spectacles of dependence and want, and stand in contrast to the relative prosperity of the shopkeeper. Nevertheless, we were left still scratching our heads at why the state intervened in the way it did. State action in this case did not just quell the violence, it in fact redressed multiple complaints of the public, even if inadvertently. This state intervention in the case of the fake food presented a seemingly new and distinct script for popular outcry and state response to township violence in South Africa.

Next, we did a deep dive into the world of YouTube videos and Twitter. We paid close attention to their texture and dramaturgy, as well as to the affects they produced. We were struck by how the videos work through performativity to produce evidentiality. The result is a call to action, based on the affective urgency derived from a threat to individual and collective health. By establishing a victim in peril, the narrators opened up a way to find a perpetrator. In this case, the perpetrator was the foreign shopkeeper, whose alleged crime was to stock one commodity as though it was another. The craft of the YouTuber was to point out

how both shopkeeper and product failed to ‘pass’ as legitimate. Taking these spectacular expressions seriously, we were able to demonstrate how seemingly over-the-top accusations of fake-ness could become a firm foundation for both mob violence and unusually swift and decisive state intervention.

We have then sought to explain the urgency inherent in the accusation of fake food in South Africa by illuminating its immediate historical context: the listeriosis outbreak that took place earlier that year. We were led to appreciate the continuing relevance of this context by our careful reading of popular commentary as it circulated on social media, exemplified in the trenchant tweet ‘Lol listeriosis says hello’. We concluded that this evocation of a health crisis is what called the state to action. In this context, connecting ‘fake food’ to the listeriosis crisis allowed a pro-active state to mobilise its resources. It also allowed the state to engage in a more winnable war. The state ventriloquised the emergency disaster relief intervention, and in so doing was able to turn away from the intractable problem of inequality and toward the more manageable one of a potential disease outbreak. Looking at what invocations of fake-ness do and at their direction of travel, helped us see this reframing of problems. In this case, the reframing invited particular achievable interventions, or ‘remedies’, such as health inspections and the closing of *spaza* shops.

How did this happen? We insist on the particularity of the fake and the work the fake can do. As Hornberger and Hodges (2023) state in their conceptual article in this special section, fake-talk connects the unconnected through its call to urgency. As we show here, it does this through two key modes. First, it is not held back by a lack of verifiable evidence but is seemingly propelled by it. In addition, fake-talk opens up a space for the performance of evidentiality. And second, this urgency is produced and sustained through public health crises. In this way, fake-talk allows the specificity of one episode (fake food) to connect to another crisis (listeriosis) that bears only passing resemblance to it. Ironically, in this case, fake-talk produced a rare occasion where those voicing xenophobic sentiments actually felt they received some redress from the state: accusations of fake food resulted in the imposition of immigrant penalties.

The power of fake-talk is such that it evades critiques premised on notions of fact-based evidence. Calling out fake-talk as a ‘hoax’ or pointing out logical contradictions (‘Why loot food you think is fake?’) does not weaken it. Instead, fake-talk can give voice to those who feel silenced; it can offer a platform to perform evidence (i.e., evidentiality) and/or to occupy the role of the expert. Our position is that by taking fake-talk seriously, despite its lack of evidence, we can apprehend the contingency of meaning, its production, and its circulation. What the case of fake-talk and the *spaza* shop shows is how fake-talk can facilitate, if not galvanise,

complex and open-ended reflections on people's desires for protection and quests for autonomous knowledge about one's own surroundings. Fake-talk should be understood as a powerful popular—and indeed, populist—tool or device, one that allows one to exert some control over life's predicaments. Fake-talk may make authorities act when they are usually absent. It may open up space for negotiation, even if it is, as in Chitukutuku's field notes, at the expense of those deemed as 'others'.

Authorship statement

Edmore Chitukutuku wrote a preliminary draft of this article. When he left the '*What's at stake in the Fake?*' research project team to take up a permanent position at Sol Plaatje University, Sarah Hodges and Julia Hornberger stepped in to finish the article. We built on his material but reoriented the argument and added further research material. Julia Hornberger and Sarah Hodges contributed equally to reframing the article and getting it through to submission.

Ethics statement

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