



AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

South Africa and the World at the Dawn of 2017
Report of a OPUS Listening Post®
held in Pretoria on 11th January 2017

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary or leisure organisations; or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

The LP was conducted on the campus of the University of South Africa (UNISA) in Pretoria. On the time boundary the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities at the beginning of 2017. In total, 5 males and 5 females attended the LP reflecting a balance in terms of gender in the room.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2, the aim collectively was to identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

Theme 1: Beyond the Space boundary: The Northern Hemisphere

This theme described participants' responses regarding life in the Northern hemisphere at this time. Participants discussed world events beyond the boundaries of South Africa, as a defence against what is happening in the here-and-now in our country. Words such as 'scary', 'frightening' and 'terrifying' were used to describe a culture of intolerance amongst international members of societies. As an opening phrase, "The world as a dangerous place", to a great extent set the scene for the remainder of the discussions where the focus of discussions was on countries in the Northern hemisphere. While attacks and counter attacks, such as in a Cape Town mosque early in January 2017 are prevalent in South Africa, they were only mentioned as an aftermath of what is happening 'out there', beyond national borders. The surprise of Donald Trump as the new President-elect underscored the unpredictability of events. Detail regarding Trumps' phenomenal ability to communicate via Twitter was a stark contrast against the lack of communication from leadership in South African politics. Mentions of planned visits to Mars further

shaded discussions with 'a flight away from home' theme.

South Africa experienced a very serious economic crises (having been assessed with the possibility to be downgraded to junk status). The country's president has over 700 corruption cases against him and despite being asked to step down he is hanging in self-protection. Also, the country experiences the most serious drought in many years. Despite these serious challenges the participants did not engage with local experiences even though one member pointed this out.

Instead, the conversations were all about the northern hemisphere and its political issues (Trump / Putin / UK / Europe) as a flight response or denial of the overwhelming political and socio-economical struggles that we as citizens are daily confronted with.

A split in opinions regarding the continent Africa as a future home was clear as the question arises: Is our future in Africa or is there a future here in South Africa for us? Our children are talking with ease about getting married 'beyond' their own cultures, within South Africa but also beyond national borders.

Although participants mentioned current leadership issues and the '# fees must fall' student protests, it did not form part of the discussions.

Conversations regarding the immigrants crossing the Mediterranean ocean in search for a better life evoked thoughts of sympathy and uncertainty. Some participants referred to politics as a non-entity in their lives and that they drew a distinction between what is happening in the political landscape in South Africa and their personal lives. There is strong evidence of citizens taking responsibility for their own happiness and what activities they engage with.

Theme 2: Circle of Influence: Creating a Sense of Community

The cyclical nature of historical events was expressed. One respondent mentioned, that "there is nothing new and everything that is happening already happened before". There is a pattern that connects the past to the present and that to the future and all people to one another. The question being put on hold, is how are we to make sense of these patterns and of what value are they to us?

There is a need to influence the sense of belonging or connection between citizens as they express it in their daily activities such as through the walking of dogs in a park and socialising with neighbours in different ways. One participant described how he initiated a street barbeque to create a safe space for social interaction and the positive effect thereof on all participants. A we-ness became evident where a sense of community enhances the living spaces of citizens and 'safety in numbers' seems to give a sense of security.

Differences between rich and the poor people in the country as well between generations were mentioned. It was said that having too high expectations of the youth as possible "saviours" would be unfair. The backlash of the apartheid legacy hits the young as they fight joblessness.

Theme 3: The Face of Technology

Participants reflected on what is happening on the macro level regarding technology and especially social media, what that represents to them and how they are influenced by these. An example was how Trump uses Twitter as a powerful means to reach people. False news on Facebook has become a burning issue as it creates unnecessary panic and chaos. Society members experience disappointment in authorities through technology, nationally as well as locally. Rebellion is evident on different levels as it is not safe anymore to have a presence on social media. While the discussion regarding safety and security in social media as well as physical living environments went on, the security guard of the University was heard checking doors in the passage and opened the door where the LP was taking place. What was happening in the unconscious mind of the group inside the room was expressed in reality outside the room, symbolising participants' need for safety and security.

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here, participants were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world: their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

Analysis 1: Beyond the Space boundary: The Northern Hemisphere

Many citizens share perceptions of disempowerment to influence the current political state of the country. As a defence, this manifests in citizens' withdrawal into their own personal space, a 'me-ness' in order to cope with the overwhelming political disasters in the news. What is happening 'out there' was more evident in the discussions than what is happening 'in here'.

Hypothesis 1: The discussions regarding the immigrant's physical flights across the Mediterranean became symbolic of the unconscious mind of the LP group, fleeing 'far and away' from matters regarding similar challenges year on year in the political landscape in South Africa, especially during the first part of the LP.

Analysis 2: Circle of Influence: Creating a Sense of Community

The important link between **personal identity and the community** was discussed. 'Who I am' is defined by 'Who I am amongst others' in interaction with other citizens. There is a focus on quality of relationships and how it contributes to quality of life. The scale moves constantly between feelings of hope and despair, especially for the **younger generations** in terms of where they will find a safe space in future.

Hypothesis 2: Similar to last years' commentary, citizens feel isolated but take action to change it. There is a growing need for

togetherness, inclusion and a sense of community. Fears of future political instability in the country may contribute to this yearning to belong and find an identity in group membership.

Analysis 3: The Face of Technology

The more things change the more they stay the same. This was the comment of one participant as he explained that technology is just the vehicle for old problems of humanity - so it is nothing new. It is a different platform where humans project their unmet needs. The same racial issues are verbalised in text instead of through a physical expression. Has technology become the transitional object, replacing the real with the fake, as citizens report a dependency on their digital devices?

Hypothesis 3: The fast growth and dynamic nature of technology results in shallow relationships where citizens experience the increasing need for interpersonal connection. Relationships are diminished to mere pictures and information without substance. It is a faceless platform. Although it is a connector, it is not addressing the needs of society to belong. The underlying racism still so prevalent in South African society contributes to a sense of despondency and a sense of 'we have seen all this before' amongst members which reflects ideologies of hope vs hopelessness.

Convener: