A RACE TO THE BOTTOM

POPULISM, MIS/DISINFORMATION AND SOUTH AFRICA'S 2021 ELECTION

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INTRODUCTION

For a democracy to thrive, access to quality and reliable information is essential. With billions across the globe using social media platforms as a source of information about elections, disinformation - false, misleading, and inaccurate information - has been deliberately crafted and spread for profit and political gain. The immense reach of social media platforms means that misinformation and disinformation (mis/disinformation, as this report will term it) can be spread to millions within minutes, and become entrenched as truth when further shared by those without the intention to mislead.

Some experts have described mis/disinformation as the number one threat to global democracy because both have distorted and manipulated democratic participation and outcomes by diminishing trust in the media and democratic institutions.

Fundamentally, mis/disinformation undermines freedom of choice, political participation, expression, and privacy. Social, cultural, and political rights have been endangered, and lives harmed or lost due to incitements to violence and repression.

In South Africa, mis/disinformation has damaged the country's social fabric with harmful narratives deliberately crafted to exploit and polarise a country with a history of apartheid. This has led to continued discrimination on the grounds of race, culture, religion, nationality, gender, political beliefs, and sexual orientation. One does not need to delve too far into the past to see the damage mis/disinformation has caused to the social fabric of South Africa's society, and how this has led to violence.

South Africa's first experience with coordinated social media disinformation took place in 2017. After being implicated in grand-scale corruption, one of the country's most powerful families, the Guptas, hired the now-defunct multinational public relations firm, Bell Pottinger, to polish its image. Bell Pottinger devised a campaign that exploited racial divisions in a country with a history of racial discrimination and tense race relations to shift public attention away from the family. Its strategy shifted blame away from the Guptas to white South Africans for the country's slow pace of economic transformation. The campaign had the effect of pitting black and white South Africans against each other, thereby stirring racial tensions. Due to its campaign, Bell Pottinger - which the US Pentagon had

previously hired for work in Iraq for a reported sum of $540 million - was expelled from the Public Relations and Communications Association, a trade association for the PR industry in the UK. The firm went into administration as clients withdrew contracts, and eventually, it had to shut down. The story about the rise and fall of Bell Pottinger was documented in the award-winning docu-film 'Influence,' which also covered the role of this project's coordinator, Phumzile Van Damme, in bringing the PR firm to justice for the campaign.

The weaponisation of race for financial and political gain in South Africa is not unique to Bell Pottinger. South African political parties' exploitation of racial fears often uses a low-hanging fruit strategy to secure votes. Political messaging that seeks to instil the fear of the return of apartheid is used by some political parties to win votes from the country's majority black population. And for white voters, the so-called notion of the 'swart gevaar' (black danger) is implied in campaign messaging. The manipulation of racial fears increases tensions in a country with a history of racial discrimination, and can foment violence with deadly consequences.

As also witnessed in US and European politics, anti-foreigner rhetoric is used by some political parties to spread fear and hatred of immigrants. In South Africa, foreigners are scapegoated and blamed for unemployment, crime, and government failure to deliver services. This has resulted in foreign nationals facing harassment, discrimination, and violence. Between March 2019 and March 2020, a Human Rights Watch study recorded numerous instances of harassment and violence against foreign nationals by mobs blaming them for unemployment, crime, and neglect by the government, among other things.[1]

As South Africa's 2021 local government (municipal) elections neared, the use of social media was set to play a more significant role than ever before. This, in part, was due to Covid-19 lockdowns, which meant that more people were online and using social media as a tool to stay in touch and follow the news. Widespread mis/disinformation about Covid-19 fuelled by a decline in trust in public institutions, science and mainstream media, made the ground fertile for electoral disinformation. This is again similar to the US where the Director of the MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy and author of 'The Hype Machine', Sinan Aral, accurately predicted that disinformation would contribute to the violence after the US election. 'Covid-19, social unrest and social media would together create a perfect storm,'[2] he predicted.

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[1] Human Rights Watch, 'South Africa: Widespread Xenophobic Violence'
https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/17/south-africa-widespread-xenophobic-violence (September 2021)
[2] Sinan Aral, 'The promise and peril of The Hype Machine'
https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/promise-and-peril-hype-machine (September 2020)

South Africa had all the ingredients for such a storm ahead of its local government elections. With these dangers at play, concerned individuals and organisations collaborated and proactively put measures in place to prevent and counter election-related mis/disinformation. This prompted the formation of the 2021 Local Governments Elections Anti-Disinformation Project.

This report details the project's work, findings and recommendations.

The report is written for both South African and international audiences, and intends to contribute a much-needed African voice to global discussions about misinformation and disinformation. Much attention has been paid to the US and European countries, but not enough on where misinformation and disinformation have also caused significant social harm and violence – the Global South.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a brief overview and discussion on populism and mis/disinformation in the run-up to South Africa's 2021 Local Government Elections. The report presents the research project's findings convened under the auspices of the 2021 Elections Anti-Disinformation Project.

The report commences with a brief introduction on mis/disinformation generally and mis/disinformation in South Africa specifically.

Chapter 1 provides an in-depth overview of the 2021 Elections Anti-Disinformation Project. This includes a brief consideration and discussion of the project's major components, which focuses on disinformation monitoring and combating, advocacy and behavioural science. The chapter also presents the key project partners that were primarily responsible for the research and compilation of this report and a detailed overview of the core phases of the project. The chapter concludes with some of the lessons learnt while undertaking the research.

Chapter 2 focuses on South Africa's social media and political landscape which included a focus on South Africa's political rights. Notably, South Africa is functioning as a constitutional democracy. The following section briefly focuses on social media laws and regulations applicable to mis/disinformation. It is noted that South Africa does not have any specific legislation governing mis/disinformation as such. However, there is a consideration of significant legislation, including the IEC's Electoral Code of Conduct, the Freedom of Expression Clause, and a brief review of South Africa's political landscape ahead of the 2021 local government elections. This is followed by an in-depth consideration of South Africa's social media landscape.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the project's public education and communications strategy. This includes a brief overview of the project's most significant press statements that were issued, including an analysis of the media coverage the project received. This is followed by a discussion of the public education campaign launched by the project with the express aim of educating and informing South Africans on how to spot mis/disinformation campaigns. Another critical section included in chapter 3 is the in-depth discussion and analysis provided on the media coverage of the 2021 local government elections and political parties.

Chapter 4 presents the most salient findings of the project. An analysis of political messaging on social media, most notably Twitter, is given. This is followed by an analysis of Facebook messaging by the political parties participating in the 2021 local government elections.

Chapter 5 provides an in-depth overview of the behavioural analysis of the mis/disinformation landscape, including a discussion of the behavioural science of mis/disinformation. This is followed by an assessment of the mis/disinformation strategies utilised during the 2021 South African elections, and explores the challenges in combating mis/disinformation, as well as the steps to consider in countering mis/disinformation.

Chapter 6 is an in-depth discussion and appraisal of social media platforms' responses to mis/disinformation during the election cycle. This includes an analysis of the respective responses by Facebook and Twitter.

Chapter 7 concludes the report with extensive recommendations based upon the outcomes and findings of the report as presented by the respective project partners.

CHAPTER 1

THE 2021 ELECTIONS ANTI-DISINFORMATION PROJECT

THE 2021 ELECTIONS ANTI-DISINFORMATION PROJECT

1.1 Introduction

The Anti-Disinformation Project was formed to identify, analyse, and combat online mis/disinformation in the lead up to South Africa's municipal elections and make recommendations regarding how it should be tackled in future.

The project represented a first-of-its-kind collaboration between individuals, continental and global organisations to tackle mis/disinformation in a South African election. The project officially launched on 1 September 2021 with the following partners:

- Phumzile Van Damme
- Lazola Kati
- Code for Africa
- WITNESS.org
- Dr David Rosenstein

The partners contributed individually and collectively to various aspects of the project including legislation review, policy analysis, fact-checking, research, data science, behavioural science, psychology, civic technology, digital communications rights, and advocacy.

Before launch, the project partners met weekly from July 2021 to build a collaborative network to monitor election strategies and messaging that had the intention of polarising communities, manipulating public discourse and spreading false information about election processes.

Careful attention was paid to regulations or policies that may have the effect of censorship, given the rise of 'digital authoritarianism' on the African continent. In June 2021, Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari announced the indefinite suspension of Twitter after the platform deleted one of his tweets (the suspension lasted 7 months). In the same month, the eSwatini government blocked access to the internet to silence pro-democracy protests in the country. An internet-related example of censorship and digital authoritarianism also happened in Uganda in January 2021 when the government ordered a social media ban ahead of its presidential election after Facebook removed 220 fake accounts linked to its Ministry of Information and Communications Technology. It was against

this backdrop that it became important to pay extra attention to the South African local government elections.

Following strategic planning meetings, the partners decided the project would have three components:

- **Mis/disinformation monitoring and combating,** focusing on political discussions online and election messaging emanating from political parties and government
- **Advocacy** focusing on social media platforms, PR firms and the use of video technology to expose human rights abuses and combat disinformation
- **Behavioural science** aimed at understanding the believability of mis/disinformation in South Africa

1.2 Project Partners

<u>**Phumzile Van Damme**</u>

Phumzile Van Damme is an independent consultant and misinformation combat specialist, and communications strategist. Van Damme serves on international bodies focused on disinformation - the Real Facebook Oversight Board and International Grand Committee on Disinformation. She is a former Member of Parliament (MP), where she served as Shadow Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies. Her interest in the subject began in 2017 when she led the charge to bring to justice one of the world's biggest PR firms, Bell Pottinger. The firm had run a disinformation campaign that exploited racial tensions in South Africa. Her work on Bell Pottinger was the subject of a documentary, 'Influence,' which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2020.

<u>**Dr David Rosentein**</u>

Dr David Rosenstein is an experienced clinical psychologist, neuroscientist, and cognitive behaviour therapist. He is an Honorary Lecturer at the University of Cape Town, where he reviews clinical cases in the Psychiatry Department and Masters/Doctoral level research at the Department of Marketing. His focus on the project was on Behavioural Science.

Lazola Kati

Lazola Kati had initially joined the project as Right2Know campaign manager, where she focused on anti-disinformation advocacy and communications rights. Right2Know experienced financial difficulties, and when Kati left the organisation, the partner organisations decided to continue working with her. She contributed to the project voluntarily and was an activist on misinformation and communication rights.

Code for Africa

Code for Africa (CfA) is Africa's largest network of civic technology and data journalism labs, with teams in 20 countries. It builds digital democracy solutions that give citizens unfettered access to actionable information that empowers them to make informed decisions, and strengthens civic engagement for improved public governance and accountability. This includes building infrastructure like the continent's largest open data portals. Chris Roper, the Deputy CEO of CfA, represented the organisation on the project providing the tools and expertise of CfA's CivicSignal research team.

Superlinear

Kyle Findlay's Superlinear uses data science to analyse social media conversations around South Africa's political landscape. For several years, he has tracked conversations on Twitter, giving a bird's-eye view of political debates in the country. Findlay's analysis has allowed the South African public to take a step back to see the wood for the trees around the larger social and political machinations. He provided data and visualisations of political conversations on Twitter.

WITNESS.org

WITNESS is a human rights non-profit organisation that partners with on-the-ground organisations to support the documentation of human rights violations in order to further public engagement, policy change, and justice. It equips activists, lawyers, journalists, and marginalised communities with the skills, tools, and capabilities to use video and technology for change.

The project worked with Adebayo Okeowo, the Africa programme manager at WITNESS and Nkem Agunwa, the Africa project coordinator at WITNESS. They both provided media literacy education and recommendations for the project.

1.3 What we did

1.3.1 Planning phase

The idea of monitoring and protecting South Africa's 2021 local government elections against mis/disinformation had been discussed between Phumzile Van Damme and various civil society organisations in mid-2020. At the time, Van Damme was an MP, where she had been working on bringing the issue of the dangers of disinformation for further scrutiny in parliament. Despite her efforts, the issue received next to no attention from other legislators.

Van Damme resigned as an MP in May 2021, presenting an opportunity to bring the project to life. She took on the role of the project's founder and coordinator.

Once all the partners joined the project, it was agreed that the project structure would be a coalition with individual and collective efforts to fight mis/disinformation. It was decided that each partner would maintain their independence, only working together for the duration of the election cycle. Each partner was self-funded and voluntarily contributed resources.

Van Damme sought funding to assist her as the project coordinator. The Friedrich Naumann Foundation provided funding which she used to hire staff for the project - a Research and Media Officer, Community Media Officer, Graphic Designer and a Data Analyst ,and the consulting fees for Dr David Rosenstein, a practising Behavioural Change Psychologist.

The partners met weekly from July 2021 to discuss what each would contribute. Code for Africa provided media monitoring, social media analysis, and contextual analysis focused on elections-related mis/disinformation, covering domestic and foreign agents. Superlinear agreed to deliver data visualisation of political conversations on Twitter. WITNESS would provide media literacy resources and legal analysis, and Lazola Kati would focus on grassroots communication.

South Africa's political landscape was analysed to scenario-plan based on possible mis/disinformation narratives that political parties could roll out in the quest to win votes.

Given that the crafters of mis/disinformation frequently change tactics to beat detection efforts, new mis/disinformation strategies and tools for combating them were to be studied and monitored as the project unfolded.

A public communication and education strategy was devised for the project, focusing on using national and provincial media to reach online users in urban areas and community media for rural and smaller communities. Educating the media about the correct terminology was also essential to avoid confusion and to ensure uniformity when discussing disinformation.

It is a well-established fact that mis/disinformation affects the brain's cognitive, emotional, and moral processes, thus resulting in the believability of mis/disinformation.

The thought process was that if awareness about the likelihood of unreliable information online was instilled, it could build more circumspect internet users and thus result in behavioural change.

As a vital aspect of the project, we believed that some attention needed to be given to how users interact with online information as part of a multi-pronged strategy to fight mis/disinformation, and hence the participation of Dr David Rosenstein.

The project aimed to do that by:
- further investigating the mechanisms through which mis/disinformation can manipulate attitudes and beliefs and, therefore, behaviour
- determine the real-world size and duration of these effects; and
- finding methods to detect and prevent these risks

This part of the project, aimed to contribute to policy discussions and foster and mobilise interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral collaboration involving political scientists, media scholars, psychologists, policymakers, civil society, and individuals.

The project also aimed to provide solutions rather than only identify and advocate against mis/disinformation.

1.3.2 Implementation phase

Using Code for Africa's CivicSignal MediaCloud, the partners crafted a watchlist of themes and political parties to monitor during the election cycle.

These groups monitored included:

- Political parties
- Factions within political parties
- Ideological groups
- Movements
- Known influence operations

Topics of interest included, but were not limited to:

- Xenophobia
- Covid-19 disinformation
- 'Critical Race Theory'
- Libertarianism (anti-authority, anti-mask-wearing, anti-vaccines, gun control)
- Attacks on the IEC's credibility
- Tribalism
- Farm murders and 'swart gevaar'
- Racism

CivicSignal MediaCloud monitored media coverage, which gave us a sense of when media coverage around these themes peaked and ebbed, how it was reported, and in which publications. This provided insight into the possible existence of influence operations using the media to disseminate information. No influence operations aimed explicitly at influencing the election outcome were detected.

The same themes were monitored on Twitter and Facebook posts – the open platforms where most political conversations happen in South Africa. Code for Africa provided weekly reports regarding discussions on Facebook, and Superlinear aggregated conversations on Twitter. (An overview of these conversations is provided in Chapter 4.)

Fact-checking
The project fact-checked claims made by the ANC, DA, EFF and ActionSA in their manifestos. No major mis/disinformation was found. For accuracy, we compared our fact-checking with Africa Check's manifestos analysis. In addition, communication from all political parties was

carefully monitored for mis/disinformation. The list of incidents of mis/disinformation encountered is listed in Chapter 4 of this report.

Behavioural science

Dr Rosenstein assessed the information provided by the various partners related to mis/disinformation. He participated in crafting messaging for the educational phase of the project to use wording that would encourage behavioural change.

Liaising with social media platforms

The project endeavoured to encourage social media platforms to sign anti-disinformation pledges. However, we were informed that most were already collaborating with the IEC in this regard. A review of Facebook and other social media efforts is provided in Chapter 6 of the report.

CHAPTER 2

SOUTH AFRICA'S SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

SOUTH AFRICA'S SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

2.1 Introduction

To fully understand the context of the work of the 2021 Anti-Disinformation Project, it is necessary to explain the South African landscape. This report section sets the scene by describing the country's legal, political, and social media landscapes, and its political parties and key issues ahead of the election.

2.2. South Africa's political rights

South Africa is a constitutional democracy with a three-tier system of government and an independent judiciary.[3]

The government is divided into three distinctive, interdependent, and interrelated tiers, each with its own legislative and executive authority in its respective spheres. These are the national, provincial, and local governments.

The local level of government consists of 278 municipalities across the country governed by Municipal Councils, each with its own legislative and executive authority. Elections in South Africa occur every five years, with national and provincial elections held concurrently and municipal elections two years later. A mixed or hybrid system is used for municipal elections, using both ward and proportional representation. Voters receive two ballots, one to vote for an individual to be ward councillor and another for the party to govern a municipality.

The duties of a municipality include:
- providing democratic and accountable government for local communities;
- ensuring the provision of services to communities in a sustainable manner;
- promoting social and economic development;
- promoting a safe and healthy environment; and

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[3] The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996
https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/constitution-republic-south-africa-1996-1

- encouraging the involvement of communities and community organisations in local government matters.

Elections are overseen by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), an independent body established in terms of section 190 South Africa's Constitution. It is impartial in exercising its powers and performing its functions. Its duties are to ensure free and fair elections, develop and promote electoral expertise and technology, and continuously review electoral laws.

Considered one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, South Africa's Constitution is the highest law in the land. It guarantees every person over 18 the fundamental right to vote in regular multi-party elections.

The right to vote is expressly protected in section 19 of the Constitution, which includes the rights for all South Africans over the age of 18 to:
- form a political party;
- participate in the activities of, or recruit members for, a political party;
- campaign for a political party or cause; and
- stand for public office and, if elected, to hold office.

When interpreted jointly, several other rights within the Bill of Rights promote full political expression in South Africa. These include:
- freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion;
- freedom to receive or impart information or ideas;
- freedom of expression;
- freedom of the press and other media;
- freedom of association;
- the right to privacy;
- the right of access to any information held by the state; and
- the right to administrative action which is lawful, reasonable, and procedurally fair.

Section 36 of the Constitution provides that no law or actions may limit rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights unless it is in terms of a law of general application, the limitation is reasonable and justifiable in an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality, and freedom, considering all relevant factors, including:
- the nature of the right;

- the importance of the purpose of the limitation;
- the nature and extent of the limitation;
- the relation between the limitation and its purpose; and
- less restrictive means to achieve the purpose.

Any efforts to combat misinformation must be understood within this human rights-based constitutional framework where the 'spirit' of the Constitution must be understood as generously guaranteeing all rights necessary for South Africans to participate in political life, and with limitation only allowed within the strict confines listed under section 36. This means that the freedom of South Africans to express their political opinions is widely protected in the country's Constitution.

2.3 Social media laws and regulations applicable to mis/disinformation
South Africa does not have standalone laws explicitly dealing with mis/disinformation or the conduct of social media platforms. However, it is possible to gauge whether specific utterances or social media posts would contradict existing laws. These are discussed in this section of the report.

There seems to be a move in the right direction by the South African government in understanding the dangers that mis/disinformation poses. In 2020, the government published a regulation criminalising misinformation relating specifically to the Covid-19 pandemic.

> *(4) Any person who intentionally misrepresents that he, she or any other person is infected with Covid-19 is guilty of an offence and on conviction liable to a fine or to imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months or to both such fine and imprisonment.*
> *(5) Any person who publishes any statement, through any medium, including social media, with the intention to deceive any other person about—*
> *(a) Covid-19; (b) Covid-19 infection status of any person; or (c) any measure taken by the Government to address Covid-19,*
> *commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine or imprisonment for a period not exceeding six months, or both such fine and imprisonment.*

However, this regulation is rarely enforced and Covid-19 mis/disinformation runs rampant.

On 1 December 2021, sections of the [Cybercrimes Act](#) came into effect. This was a month after the election, so not applicable during the country's election. The law criminalises 'malicious messages', which includes the dissemination of electronic communications that:

- incites damage to property or violence;
- threatens persons with damage to property or violence; and
- discloses intimate images.

The freedom of expression clause

The [Constitution of South Africa](#) provides extensive protection of freedom of speech in section 16 outlined below:

> 'Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of the press and other media; freedom to receive or impart information or ideas; freedom of artistic creativity; and academic freedom and freedom of scientific research.' Section 16(2) restricts speech-related 'to propaganda for war; incitement of imminent violence; or advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm.'

This means that all speech is protected except:

- propaganda for war
- incitement of imminent violence
- advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender, or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm (hate speech)

The clause provides a guideline against which mis/disinformation can be measured and whether it constitutes protected free speech. If it is not, incitement can be reported to the police. South Africa has designated Equality Courts where discrimination and hate speech can be reported and adjudicated.

The IEC Code of Conduct

The IEC regulates the conduct of political parties during an election cycle through its Electoral [Code of Conduct](#). The Code promotes conditions conducive to free and fair elections and comes into force as soon as the election date is proclaimed.. It aims to create a climate of tolerance, free political campaigning, and open public debate.

The code of conduct prohibits political parties from 'publishing false information about other parties' and generally abusing a position of power, privilege or influence to influence the outcome of an election.' These sections read together, although not explicitly stated, prohibit disinformation.

Violations of the code of conduct constitute a criminal offence and can result in severe consequences for political parties, from de-registration, nullification of votes, fines, and imprisonment of up to 10 years. These sanctions serve as a deterrent, and most political parties tend to stick to their prescripts.

Complaints regarding violation of the code of conduct can be reported to the Electoral Court - a specialist court with the highest authority on election cases and of the same status as the Supreme Court. Since 2001, the Electoral Court has handed down judgments[4] in disputes on a variety of matters regarding violations of it. The most well-known case, which has some bearing to mis/disinformation is a dispute between the ANC and the DA.[5] The dispute involved an SMS that the DA sent on 20 March 2014 during the lead up to the 2014 general elections. The SMS read, '*The Nkandla report shows how Zuma stole your money to build his R246m home. Vote DA on 7 May to beat corruption.*' This was sent one day after the public protector released what's now called the 'Nkandla Report' concerning her investigation into security upgrades at then-president Jacob Zuma's private residence.

The ANC brought an application in the South Gauteng High Court for an interdict against the DA and an order compelling it to retract the SMS and apologise. It contended that the message constituted false information published to influence the election's outcome in violation of the IEC's code. Relying on its right to freedom of expression, the DA opposed the application, arguing that the SMS was a fair comment and expressed a genuinely and honestly held view based on the facts contained in the Nkandla Report. It also contended that the content of the SMS was not false.

The High Court held that the message amounted to fair comment and therefore found in favour of the DA and dismissed the ANC's application. The ANC appealed to the Electoral Court, which reversed the High Court's decision. It held that the SMS was false and that its publication thus constituted a violation of the Electoral Act and code of conduct.

The DA appealed the decision at the Constitutional Court, which found that the SMS was not 'false information'. The Electoral Act or Code did not prohibit its publication.

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[4] Electoral Court judgments: https://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZAEC/
[5] African National Congress v Democratic Alliance and Another (004/14 EC) [2014] ZAEC 4; 2014 (5) SA 44 (EC) (6 May 2014) https://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZAEC/2014/4.html

This case demonstrates the checks and balances available for resolving disputes between political parties and sets a judicial precedent regarding how matters relating to false information are to be interpreted. To date, the last judgment that the Electoral Court handed down was in 2019, and there has not been a test case to see the application of this judicial precedent. It would have been helpful for the Electoral Court to have a test case to apply the precedent set by the Constitutional Court.

2.4 South Africa's political landscape ahead of the 2021 election

Since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) has dominated general and municipal elections. The ANC currently holds the most seats in Parliament, having received 57.50% of the vote during the 2019 general election. It received 53.9% of the total vote in 2016 when the last municipal elections were held.

The Democratic Alliance (DA), the main opposition party, received 20.77% of the 2019 election and 26.9% in 2016. Ahead of the 2021 elections, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) was the third biggest party with 8.19% of the vote in 2016 and 10.80% in 2019.

New political parties, namely ActionSA, GOOD and the Patriotic Alliance, were predicted to pose a threat to the ANC, DA and EFF's dominance at the polls.

A broad description of the ideology of the main parties contesting the election is as follows:
- African National Congress (ANC): Social Democratic
- Democratic Alliance (DA): Centre-Right Liberal
- Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF): Far Left
- ActionSA: Centre-Right Liberal
- GOOD: Social Democratic
- Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP): Social Democrat
- Freedom Front Plus (FF+): Right-Wing Conservative
- Patriotic Alliance (PA): Social Democracy Third Way
- African Transformation Movement (ATM): Christian Conservatism
- African Christian Democratic Party: Christian Nationalism
- Cape Party: Separatist-Right Wing

SA Municipal Elections 2021

A snapshot of the ideology of the main parties contesting the election.

According to the Constitution, the term of a municipal council is five years. The president proclaims the election date within 90 days of the five-year term expiring.

Voters must be registered ahead of the elections to record their details on the voters' roll. The IEC has registration days (usually weekends) to allow voters to register, update their details or check their registration status. In 2021, the IEC provided online voter registration for new voters to register and existing voters to update or amend their registration. This was part of the IEC's modernisation plans and, in part, necessitated by Covid-19 lockdowns.

Political parties and independent candidates must submit their candidate nomination lists by a date prescribed by the IEC to contest elections. Failure to do so results in an automatic disqualification of the party and its candidates.

The election date, voter registration and submission of candidate lists was the subject of much controversy in 2021 and the root of some misinformation.

With the previous municipal elections having taken place on 3 August 2016, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced on 21 April 2021 that the municipal elections would be held on 27 October 2021. The following day, the IEC held a pre-arranged meeting with representatives of political parties. Some expressed concern that the polls might not be free and fair, emphasising the lockdown restrictions forbidding gatherings.

Following these concerns, on 20 May 2021, the IEC appointed former Deputy Chief Justice Dikgang Moseneke to lead a process that evaluated whether the forthcoming municipal election would be free and fair, given the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures taken by the government to curb the continued spread of the virus. As part of what would be known as the Moseneke Inquiry, submissions from various stakeholders were heard, including from the public, political parties, the administration of the IEC and health authorities.

While this process was underway, the IEC committed to continuing with all its preparations to hold the elections on 27 October, and special registration days were designated on 17 and 18 July 2021. On 8 July, the IEC announced that it had postponed the voter registration weekend by two weeks, given that the country was within a third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

On 20 July, the Moseneke Inquiry concluded that if held in October 2021, the municipal elections would not be free and fair and would put at risk the constitutional right to access health care services, and the right to freedom and security of the person. The Moseneke Inquiry recommended that the elections be held no later than the end of February 2022. It further recommended that the IEC consider approaching the courts to apply for an order postponing the polls.

Therefore, the IEC applied to the Constitutional Court to request a postponement of the elections. In its application, the IEC argued that because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it could not organise a constitutionally-compliant election for 27 October. The IEC's application was supported by the ANC,

EFF, and IFP. However the DA, other smaller political parties and various civil society organisations opposed it.

On 3 September, the Constitutional Court dismissed the IEC's application and ordered it to decide a date for the election that falls within the 90 days prescript of the Constitution and to hold a registration weekend.

On 6 September, the IEC announced that the election would be held on 1 November 2021 and that voter and candidate registration would be reopened. A registration weekend was not held on 31 July as scheduled as the Moseneke report had been released a week before.

The reopening of candidate registration was another source of litigation and controversy.

The ANC had missed the deadline to register its candidates by 23 August, which meant it was disqualified from contesting in some municipalities. The party applied to the Electoral Court for an extension but withdrew it on 30 August. Following the Constitutional Court's order, the IEC announced that candidate registration would be reopened. The DA then approached the Constitutional Court to nullify the IEC's decision to reopen the registration process. On 20 September, the Constitutional Court dismissed the DA's application.

While the issue regarding the critical dates and processes needed for the elections to take place was now settled, it had eroded the public's confidence in the IEC to hold free and fair elections.

Some political parties also fanned this skepticism. Helen Zille, the Federal Executive Chairperson of the DA, posted tweets to her over 1-million followers suggesting that the IEC, ANC, and Constitutional Court had colluded to benefit the ANC. Zille provided no evidence to support this claim.

Zille's posts solidified the lack of confidence in the IEC in some quarters, contributing to concerns of the possibility of the election results being disputed and resulting in violence, as was also witnessed in the US.

Zille's tweet did not result in an official finding of disinformation by the Electoral Code because the IEC Code of Conduct only comes into effect after the election date is proclaimed. She was, however, widely condemned.

Other than the crisis caused by the disputes over the election date, other factors contributed to a tense environment ahead of the election.

Over six days in July 2021, the country experienced rioting, looting, and violence unprecedented since the advent of democracy, with a death toll of more than 300 people and damage to property and business estimated in the billions. This violence had stemmed partly from disinformation regarding the reasons for the arrest of the former president Jacob Zuma. In Phoenix, Durban, the community in the

area, mostly Indian South Africans, had allegedly killed an estimated 36 South Africans, 33 of them Black and three Indian, allegedly because they assumed them to be looters. According to News24, 'With the rule of law abandoned, looters and innocent bystanders were targeted because of the colour of their skin.'[6] When the violence subsided, the social fabric of South Africa had been damaged, and old racial fears and tensions reignited.

The Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change at the University of Cape Town conducted a study[7] on posts shared on Twitter considered to be inciting violence. It found that accounts belonging to the Radical Economic Transformation (RET) faction of the ANC were in the top 12 accounts responsible for inciting violence on social media during the unrest in South Africa — initiated by calls for Zuma to be released from prison. The hashtags associated with the tweets generated 1.29 million mentions, with a volume of more than one million retweets.

The coordinated nature of this campaign added to fears that more disinformation would be shared during the election resulting in more violence.

The socio-economic conditions of South Africa also adds a contributory factor. By the start of 2020, the economy was experiencing some of its worst structural economic constraints:

- Economic growth was recorded at 0.2%
- Agriculture was the main drag on the economic growth, contracting by 1.4%
- Formal unemployment reached 29%
- Youth unemployment was the biggest concern, estimated at 53.18%, with those younger than 25 years old comprising 58%
- Major credit rating agencies like Fitch, and Standard and Poor downgraded South Africa's sovereign debt from stable to negative
- The budget deficit widened to 4.5% due to revenue shortfalls
- State wages and spending constituted the highest spending of over 34% of consolidated expenditure in the 2019-2020 budget
- Bailouts to distressed state-owned enterprises continued

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[6] Phoenix killings: New data suggests Indians, homes were never the target in face of race killings.
[7] Molebogang Mokoka (2021) Meet the instigators : The Twitter accounts of the RET forces network that incited violence and demanded Zuma's release,

- Household debt constituted over 34% of GDP, meaning that more than one-third of families across the country relied on debt as part of their household income.[8]

The country's socio-economic landscape presented a bleak picture. The situation was made more vulnerable by increasing inequality and the rise in basic food costs due to the volatility of South Africa's currency, which saw fuel price hikes, in addition to massive hikes in electricity tariffs. The impact of wasteful government expenditure coupled with financial irregularities and corruption represented an additional burden to the state's socio-economic dilemma.

At the beginning of 2021, it became clear that Covid-19 had had a significant impact on both the world and South Africa's economy and labour market:[9]
- 2 million people lost their jobs, resulting in a 32.5% unemployment rate
- Young people faced acute unemployment, twice as high as older age groups. Among 15 - 24-year-olds, 63% were unemployed and looking for work. When discouraged work seekers are included, the unemployment rates are as high as 74% for 15 - 24-year-olds and 51% for 25 - 34-year-olds.

South Africa has one of the highest persistent inequality rates globally, perpetuated by a legacy of exclusion and the nature of economic growth. This creates disillusionment, anger and ignites racial tension, making the ground ripe for populism and disinformation.

It is within this environment that the country headed to the polls in 2021, having emerged from a period of public unrest, racial tension, a constitutional crisis, and high unemployment.

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[8] Sanusha Naidu, (2021), The Impact of Covid-19: The Conundrum of South Africa's Socio-economic Landscape, Covid-19 In-Depth Analysis,
https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/the-impact-of-Covid-19-the-conundrum-of-south-africas-socio-economic-landscape/

[9] World Bank, 'South Africa Economic Update: South Africa's Labour Market Can Benefit from Young Entrepreneurs, Self-Employment' July 2021
https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southafrica/publication/south-africa-economic-update-south-africa-s-labor-market-can-benefit-from-young-entrepreneurs-self-employment

2.5 Social media landscape

According to Statistica, as of January 2021, there were over 38 million active internet users in South Africa. An overwhelming majority, nearly 99% of those using social media accessed their accounts through mobile phones.[10]

[World Wide Worx](#)'s 'South African Social Media Landscape 2021 Report,'[11] conducted after a full year of Covid-19 lockdowns, found that 38.19 million people in a population of an estimated 57 million use the internet. This was a 1.7-million increase from 2020, in line with global trends that saw an increase in online traffic increase during Covid-19 lockdowns. Social media users in South Africa grew to 25 million, which represented an increase of 3 million users (14% increase). World Wide Worx also found that WhatsApp is South Africa's primary mode of communication, with 93.2% using WhatsApp for texts, calls and video calls. When Facebook Inc. announced its new WhatsApp privacy policy in January 2021, many mobile users migrated to competitors like Telegram and Signal. However, there is no available data regarding the number of users that stopped using WhatsApp. Nonetheless, it indicates that the South African population has begun to see online privacy as a concern.

People aged 25-34 make up almost half of the social media users, whilst those aged 18 - 24 account for 40%. The use of social media platforms was found to be as follows[12]:
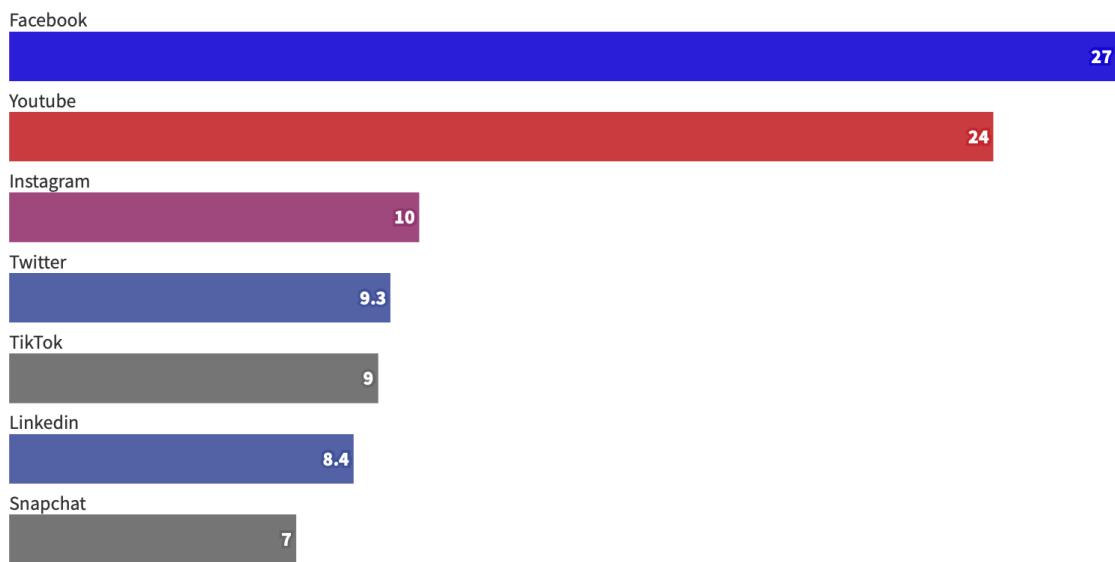
- Facebook: 27 million
- YouTube: 24 million
- Instagram: 10 million
- Twitter: 9.3 million
- Tik Tok: 9 million
- LinkedIn: 8.4 million
- Snapchat: 7 million

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[10] Statistica, 'South Africa: digital population as of January 2021'
https://www.statista.com/statistics/685134/south-africa-digital-population/
[11] World Wide Worx, 'The Social Media Landscape Report 2021'
https://website.ornico.co.za/2021/06/30/the-social-media-landscape-report-2021/
[12] World Wide Worx, 'The Social Media Landscape Report 2021'
https://website.ornico.co.za/2021/06/30/the-social-media-landscape-report-2021/ (p

Number of Social Media Users in South Africa (In Millions)

Facebook
27

Youtube
24

Instagram
10

Twitter
9.3

TikTok
9

Linkedin
8.4

Snapchat
7

Source: The Social Media Landscape Report 2021 (World Wide Worx).

Freedom House rated South Africa as 'free' in the '2020 Freedom on the Net report.' It listed, among others, the following reasons:[13]

- Neither the government nor non-state actors restrict digital tools for mobilisation and campaigning. South Africa has a robust online community that addresses contemporary social, economic, and political issues.

- There are no laws requiring internet users, website owners or bloggers in South Africa to register with the government or any of its agencies to operate. Users are also not required to use their real names when posting comments on the internet, including on social media platforms.

- The government does not have direct control over the country's internet backbone or its connection to the international internet. There have been no efforts to filter the internet and other ICT content. There is no evidence of blocking or content filtering on mobile phones.

- State and non-state actors do not frequently force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete legitimate content.

- No individual was prosecuted, detained, or sanctioned by the state for protected political, social, or religious speech online.

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[13]' Freedom House, 'Freedom House 2020 State of the Net Report: South Africa'
https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa/freedom-net/2020

- South Africa is highly vulnerable to cyber security threats on many fronts. However, independent news outlets and opposition voices were not subject to targeted technical attacks during the coverage period.

CHAPTER 3

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

3.1 Introduction

Ahead of the elections, the project's communications team - Nick Cowen and Gamane Gama- were tasked with raising awareness about the project and the potential for disinformation on social media platforms, with a critical focus on public education.

The country's media landscape is incredibly diverse and the project considered South Africa's various demographic groups to create a media strategy, including age, locations, incomes, races, cultures, beliefs, and languages.

While South Africans consume media across many platforms – smart devices, laptops and the like – many still use more traditional mediums, especially radio. The South African Broadcasting (SABC), as public broadcaster, owns radio and TV with the biggest footprint and is mandated to broadcast in all 11 languages. The privately-owned eNCA, the 24-hour television news broadcaster owned by e.tv, is the country's most-watched news channel.

To that end, the team created messaging around the project's aims, the involvement of its partners and talking points for interviews. Press releases were targeted at national and community media outlets (TV, radio, print and online). Interviews were collated and posted to social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter – and to music streaming platform, Spotify.

In national, provincial, and online media, the communications team aimed for top tier outlets including (but not limited to) EWN, News24, IOL, The Citizen, TimesLIVE, Newsroom Afrika, and the SABC.

These outlets were essential to secure coverage given their large audiences, making it easier to reach a critical South African population. Community outlets were – and remain – equally important, particularly in accessing rural communities that do not have the same access to information as those in urban settings. Stations such as Jozi FM in Soweto, Gauteng and Emalahleni FM in Emalahleni, Mpumalanga broadcast to communities often clouded by mis/disinformation.

It was vital to target rural radio stations such as Phonglo FM in Phonglo and Waterberg FM in Lephalale, Limpopo. These stations broadcast to villages, farming areas and deep rural communities.

Their audience traditionally listens to the radio for their daily news. Political parties often take advantage of these communities because they have few traditional media sources.

There are more than 180 community radios in South Africa. The project managed to reach over 120 stations in all nine provinces. These stations broadcast in all 11 South African official languages. It was also important to secure coverage on campus radio stations such as Voice of Wits, based in the University of Witwatersrand, and TUT FM, based at the Tshwane University of Technology. These stations broadcast to young audiences.

The communications team generated a significant amount of media coverage and managed to put the issue of disinformation into the national discourse ahead of the 2021 municipal elections. Voters needed to be on their guard ahead of the polls and stop seeing social media as a news source. We believe that this message landed.

3.2 Press statements issued

Local Government Election 2021 Anti-Disinformation Project Launches (01/09/2021)
We are announcing the launch of the first-of-its-kind common-purpose 'country duty' collaborative project against disinformation and misinformation.

Local Government Election 2021 Anti-Disinformation to monitor all political parties as IEC proclaims election date (09/09/2021)
As Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma announces the election, the project begins monitoring social media for instances of disinformation.

With election declared, political parties could face heavy penalties for disinformation (13/09/2021)
The press release announcing the penalties for violating the IEC's code of conduct.

Local Government Project Anti-Disinformation launches Education Phase 1 (26/09/2021)
Statement on the education slides (in English) launched on social media.
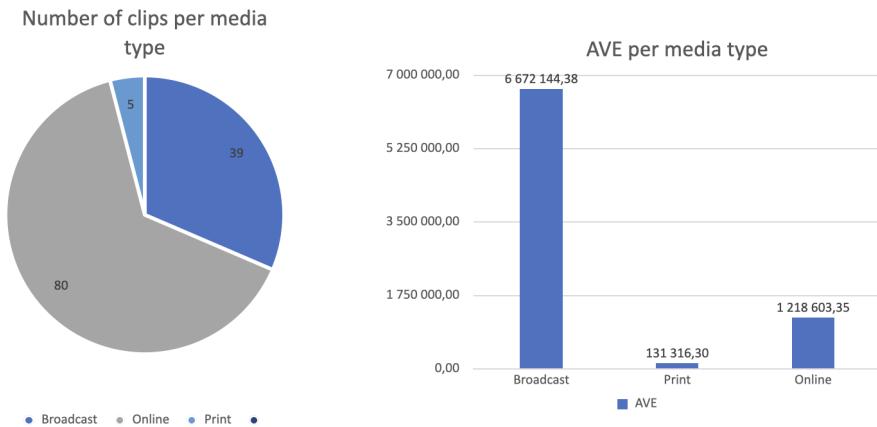
Local Government Election 2021 Anti-Disinformation launches Education Phase 2 (10/10/2021)
Statement on the graphics launched in all South Africa's official languages on social media.

3.3 Analysis of media coverage of the project

We received excellent general coverage over the period of 2 months. Overall advertising value was over R8 million, indicating that top tier publications received our message.

Coverage breakdown – media types

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The key terms associated with the coverage are reflected below.

Sentiment analysis of the coverage was positive, which stood the project in good stead, given that most of South Africa's media's political coverage tends to be negative. Key messages reflected positively in the range we received.

Online media generated the most significant amount of coverage. While broadcast came in second, print media was not as successful, but the online and broadcast traction mitigated it.

We used social media to share content to ensure consistent communication about the dangers of mis/disinformation during the election cycle. Interviews conducted were made available on Spotify.

Coverage was generated through press releases, opinion pieces, targeted articles and proactively sought interview opportunities. Sound clips covering many of South Africa's languages were also made available.

The communications team secured interviews in broadcast media for the project's partners on a rotational basis. This meant that a wide variety of topics related to mis/disinformation were covered. For example, Dr David Rosenstein explained the psychology behind the believability of misinformation, and the importance of behavioural change in his interviews. WITNESS's Adebayo Okeowo emphasised the importance of media literacy in combating misinformation. Lazola Kati advocated on behalf of communities about their rights to access credible information and not be manipulated. Phumzile Van Damme spoke to South Africa's politics and analysed the various parties' election campaign strategies.

The partners also communicated in their own capacities. Code for Africa's Chris Roper published opinion pieces on tackling issues of political controversy. Phumzile Van Damme used the platform her extensive social media following affords to expose and debunk misinformation, the weaponisation of race, and xenophobia quickly before it became embedded.

3.4 Public education

After the project was officially launched, the communications team rolled out a public education campaign geared towards educating and informing South Africans on how to spot mis/disinformation campaigns, the importance of fact-checking, and techniques used in the past to disrupt and manipulate political discourse. It was also essential to educate the media about the correct terminology when reporting the subject. The phrase 'fake news' is still used by many as an umbrella term for mis/disinformation.

The messaging would have to be compelling and encourage behavioural change and Dr David Rosenstein was crucial in this project phase as was Adebayo Okeowo from WITNESS.org with his knowledge and experience of media and digital literacy.

The messaging aimed to shift the blame from users and place it at the door of bad actors who craft and circulate disinformation. To be effective, we saw it as essential to present the messaging so that it does not leave users feeling foolish for believing mis/disinformation, but rather create strong distrust in those that may craft disinformation. Often, users are not thoughtless in believing nis/disinformation; they are deceived into believing it.

We opted for simple messaging that would be free of jargon so as to be understandable to all: 'What you see online and on WhatsApp may be lies.'

To this end, graphics explaining how to fact-check and the different terminologies used for mis/disinformation were created. As a summary, the graphics described the following topics:

- How to protect yourself from lies (fact-checking)
- What are trolls and troll farms
- What are bots and bot farms
- What is a conspiracy theory
- What is fake news, and how to gauge whether a news publication is fake
- What are disinformation and misinformation, and how the two differ
- Defining protected free speech and how it differs from hate speech
- The importance of online literacy
- What is a deepfake

The education campaign was announced via press releases and amplified in interviews with community, national, provincial, and student media. The graphics were shared on Facebook and Twitter and disseminated to community activists who often have databases for each ward in South Africa. The graphics were easy to share on WhatsApp, a platform many South Africans use as the primary mode of communication.

The graphics were also translated into all 11 South Africa's languages to reach a wider audience.

WHAT YOU SEE ONLINE AND ON WHATSAPP MAY BE LIES.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM LIES (FACT-CHECKING)

1. Get the whole story, not just the headline.
2. Check to see if the story is from a trusted source.
3. Check to see if images are faked.
4. Check to see if the story is widely reported by mainstream news.
5. Report fake news.
6. Use tools provided on social media.
7. Do not share if you are unsure whether the content is true.

TROLL

An individual how/the act of posting inflammatory content to provoke or disrupt.

TROLL FARM

A group using trolling or bot-like promotion in a coordinated fashion.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Everyone has the right to freedom of speech freedom to receive or impart information or ideas.

BUT, HATE SPEECH IS ILLEGAL

HATE SPEECH

Creating or sharing messages that incite violence or advocate for hatred on the grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, religion and similar grounds.

DEEP FAKE

Video, audio, and image manipulation of a person so that they appear to have said or done something they didn't do.

DISINFORMATION

False, inaccurate and misleading information spread deliberately to deceive and manipulate the public for political gain.

VS

MISINFORMATION

False, inaccurate and misleading information spread without the intention to deceive.

FAKE NEWS

News outlets that pretend to be real but are actually fake. Fake news includes false stories crafted to appear real.

CONSPIRACY THEORY

A belief that some secret and powerful person, group, organisation or third force is responsible for social and political events.

BOT

A bot can be mistaken for a real person but it's not. They are computer controlled fake social media accounts often used to spread false and misleading information.

HOW TO SPOT A BOT

1. Keywords, content topics and hashtags are shared repeatedly.
2. Activity is unusually high – posts or tweets for example can appear around 50 times in 5 mins.
3. Tweets and posts are continually re-tweeted or re-posted within seconds.
4. Bots do not react the way humans do. They spam replies that push agendas.

ONLINE INFORMATION LITERACY

The ability to identify, find, evaluate, and use information online to your benefit. Information literacy protects you from information may be false, manipulative and cause harm to you, your family and community.

BOTNET

A network of bots that act in coordination and are typically operated by one person or group. Botnets can include as many as tens of thousands of bots.

-

ZULU

LOKHO OKUBONAYO KU-INTHANETHI NAKU-WHATSAPP KUNGABA NGAMANGA.

AFRIKAANS

HOE OM JOUSELF TE BESKERM TEEN LEUENS (FEITEKONTROLE)

1. Kyk na die hele storie, nie net die opskrif.
2. Kyk of beelde vals is.
3. Kyk of die storie van 'n betroubare bron is.
4. Kyk of die storie wyd deur die media gerapporteer word.
5. Moenie deel as jy onseker is of die inhoud waar is nie.
6. Rapporteer fopnuus.
7. Gebruik gereedskap wat deur sosiale media verskaf word.

SEPEDI
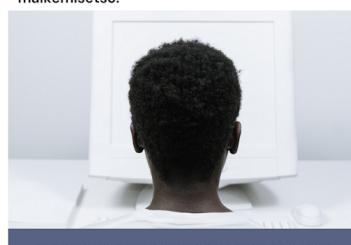
DISINFORMATION (MAAKA)

Maaka le go se tsamaiše tshedimošo ya nnete ke go phatlalatša, go dira gore batho ba kgolwe seo e seng nnete ka go tshireletša polotiki.

VS

MISINFORMATION (MAAKA)

Maaka le seo se sa tsebegeng le go phamoša tshedimošo go phatlalatša ntle le maikemišetšo.

SWATI

CONSPIRACY THEORY

Kutsemba kutsi infihlo noma emandla emuntfu noma enhlangano inesadla emicimbini yesive.

VENDA

BOT

Hafha hu a khakhisa wa vhona unga muthu ndi wa vhukuma matsina ndi muthu a shumaho na u langiwa nga computer ha mazwifhi hu shumusiwaho u phadaladza mafhungo asi one.

BOTNET

Robotho ndi vhudavhidzano ho vhumbiwaho nga muthu kana tshigwada tsha vhathu. Hezwi zwi nga angeredza zwgidi zwa madana a fumi.

3.5 Analysis of media coverage of political parties: Code for Africa

Using its CivicSignal MediaCloud natural language processing platform, Code for Africa analysed media coverage of the local government elections by 534 South African media organisations from 1 September to 10 November 2021.
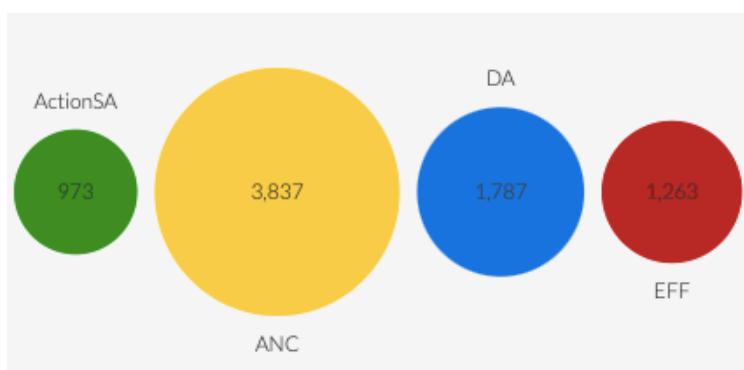
The CivicSignal MediaCloud platform interrogates how topics of interest are covered in digital media by monitoring attention over time, looking at the language used in different media narratives, and tracking entities (such as parties and party leaders). This analysis is intended to be read in tandem with Superlinear's analysis of tweets collected over the two weeks preceding voting day.

Of interest is the fact that, while digital news media does not mirror Twitter, we can see the same disproportionately large share of voice commanded by a small party like ActionSA. While this is not an exhaustive analysis, we have looked at whether there is any correlation between the populist tropes of toxic narratives such as xenophobia, and increased coverage of a political party.
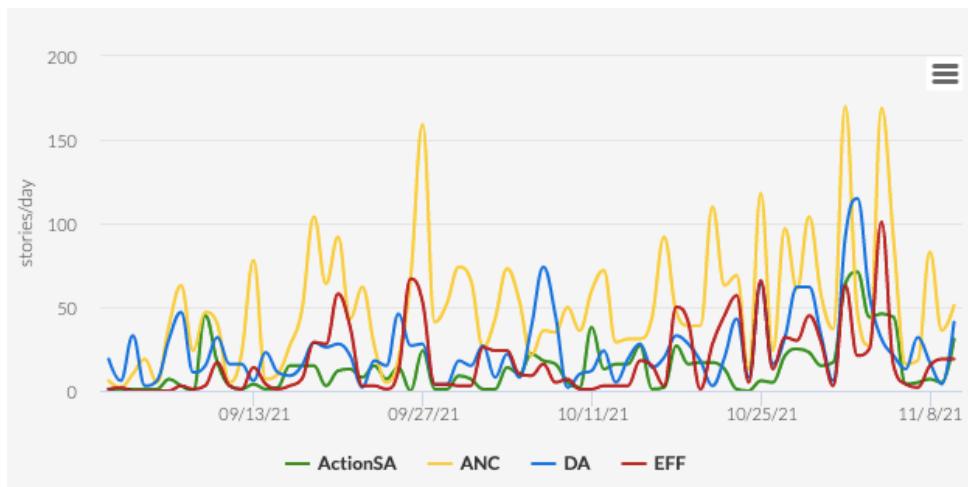
Party leaders and top officials

Looking at the top four parties in terms of coverage of the top three officials per party, the ANC leaders received significantly more mentions than other parties. However, it's worth noting that ActionSA's leaders, whose party is only one year old, were the media's fourth most mentioned party officials. The party commanded 12.6% of the total mentions of the top four.

Contrast this to the official election results, and the disproportionate share of voice held by ActionSA is even more stark. The ANC received 47.9 % of the vote and 47.4% media coverage. The DA 20% of the vote, and 23.2% of media coverage, and the EFF 10.6% of the vote and 16.4% media coverage. ActionSA's 1.8% vote is minuscule compared to 12.6% media coverage.
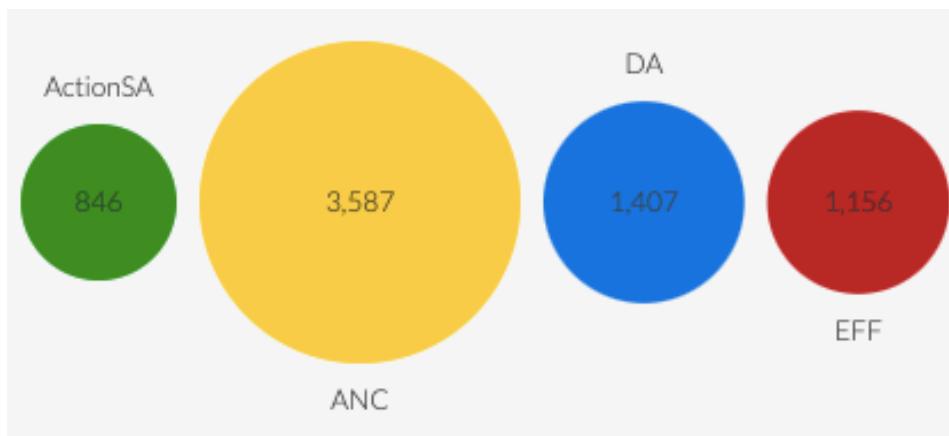
Mentions of party leaders and top officials 13/09 - 8/11 (CivicSignal)
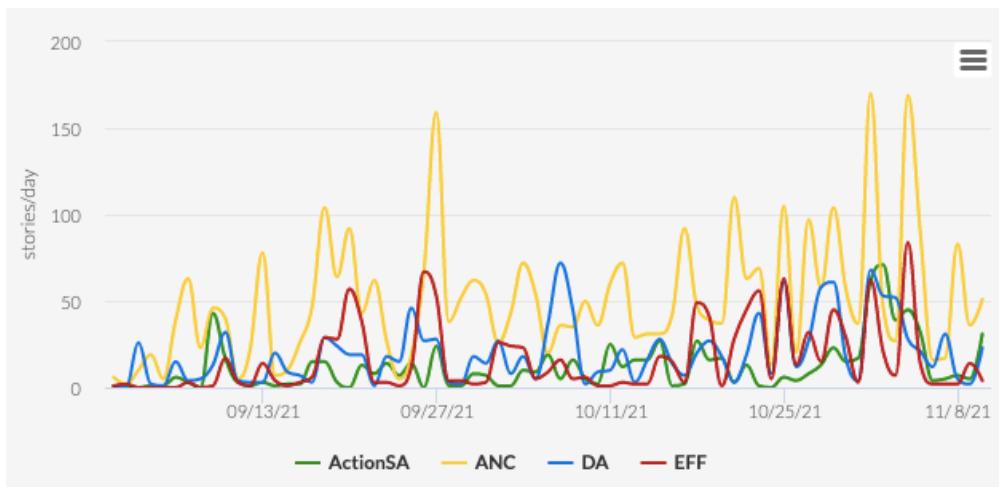
Mentions of party leaders and top officials 13/09 - 8/11 (CivicSignal)

Party leaders only

The picture is similar when we look at mentions of party leaders only. Although the ANC dominates, it's striking that the DA does not command significantly more media coverage than ActionSA and the EFF, as you might expect from a party that received 20% of the vote.
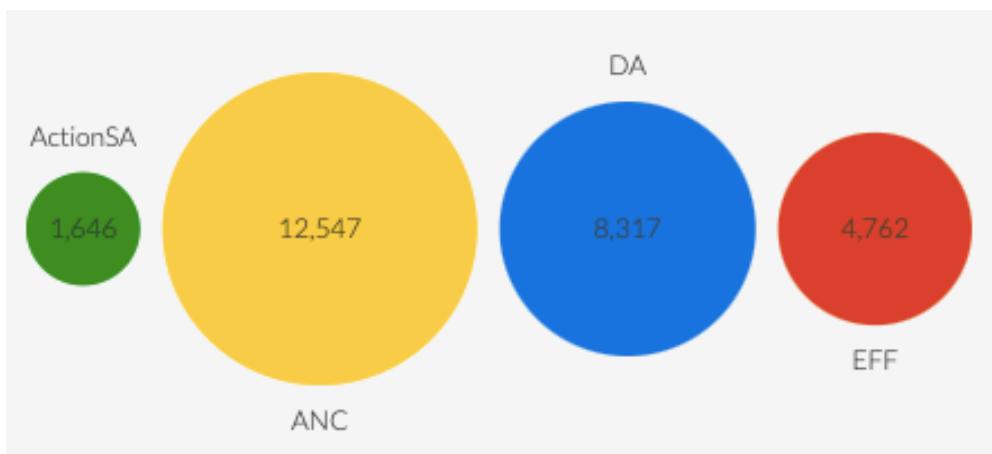
Mentions of party leaders 13/09 - 8/11 (CivicSignal)
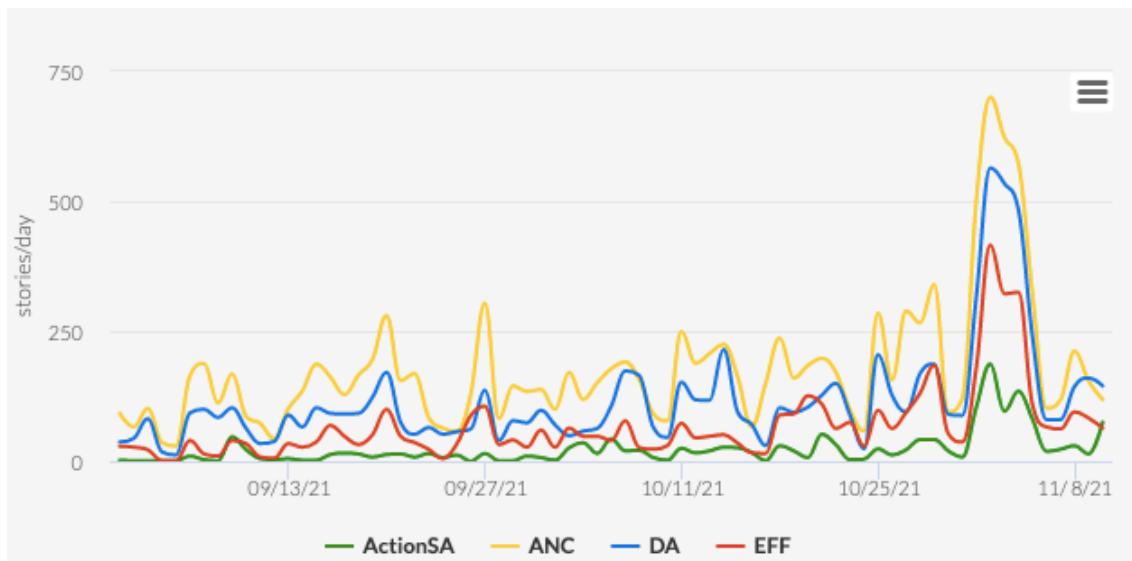
Mentions of party leaders 13/09 - 8/11 (CivicSignal)

Parties (ANC, DA, EFF, ActionSA)

This changes somewhat when we look at mentions of the parties themselves. Although ActionSA has generated a remarkable amount of media coverage, it is still appreciably less than that achieved by the other three parties. Nevertheless, it is still the party with the most significant amount of media coverage, outstripping other smaller parties. And, of course, ActionSA's ascendancy is much more stark on Twitter, where its brand of populism has found fertile ground.

Mentions of parties, Sept 1 - Nov 10 (CivicSignal)
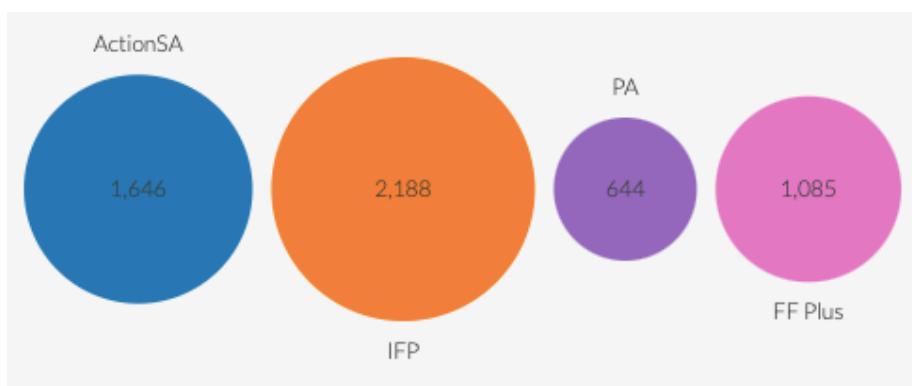
Mentions of parties, Sept 1 - Nov 10 (CivicSignal)

Smaller parties

Let's look at the four best-performing small parties in the election. ActionSA has a disproportionate share of voice when contrasted to votes received, as does the Patriotic Alliance to a degree. This would indicate that populist rhetoric and dabbling in xenophobia and other misinformation tropes work to raise a party's profile.

To emphasise, the share of voice is contrasted with the four parties, but voting percentages are of the entire elections. The graph is intended to show parties' share of voice in the media against each other relative to their performances in the elections. The IFP received 6.3% of the votes, FF+ 2.3%, ActionSA 1.8%, and Patriotic Alliance 0.90%.

Mentions of smaller parties, Sept 1 - Nov 10 (CivicSignal)
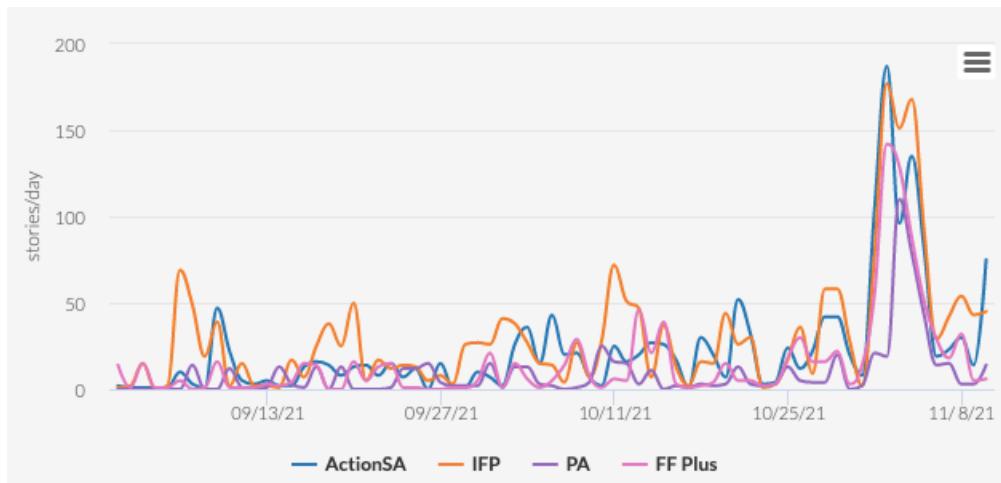
In 5,563 stories where ActionSA, IFP, PA, and FFPlus were mentioned:

ActionSA = 29.6%

IFP = 39.3%

PA = 11.6%

FFPlus = 19.5%

Mentions of smaller parties, Sept 1 - Nov 10 (CivicSignal)

While more work needs to be done to correlate parties' use of populist tropes, and their willingness to spread misinformation or disinformation, with their ability to command attention and voice in media, it's evident that the big three political parties of South Africa do not command the stage in quite the way to which they have been accustomed. Using ActionSA as an example, we can see that, in some cases, while winning the vote on Twitter does not reflect in election results, it does appear to have a bearing on winning the battle for media attention.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGN MESSAGING AND DISINFORMATION

ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGN MESSAGING AND DISINFORMATION
Superlinear

4.1 Analysis of political messaging on social media: Twitter

Twitter is a unique public platform that gives us unprecedented insight into its users' behaviour. This makes it the ideal lens through which to describe the main groups contesting the political space around the 2021 Local Government Elections. Many of these insights carry over to other platforms such as Facebook (although each platform has its specific dynamics).

While Twitter's user base might not broadly represent the South African population, many, including politicians, are afforded a digital soapbox to advocate for their campaign messaging. It is also where journalists and opinion makers gather, and through them, these messages percolate into South Africa's general discourse via news media and the like. Twitter has arguably become one of the prime theatres for political contestation among political parties and the electorate. Twitter has indeed become one of the most potent vehicles through which politicians and the electorate can voice opinions and their views.

Ahead of the elections, ideological boundaries on Twitter became more clearly defined and mutually exclusive than in the past, making it more difficult than ever for one party to speak to diverse groups of voters.

What follows is a summary of the broad ideological groups that make up South African Twitter. After this high-level overview, we will delve into the specific communities that these broad groups 'live' within on Twitter.

First, to set the context, Black South Africans make up about 80% of the population. Similarly, they make up the most prominent communities on South African Twitter. This group is where most undecided voters about which party to support resided and, therefore, formed a pool from which most parties and their respective ideologies attracted new voters. The group could broadly be split into the middle and working classes.

Middle-class community members tended to have a socially progressive stance with an acute interest in social justice. Political parties such as the ANC, EFF and (decreasingly so) the DA emphasised social justice aspects of their manifestos to tap into this group. The faction within the ANC which supported President Cyril Ramaphosa – the so-called CR17 faction – had its significant foothold in this group. Former DA leader Mmusi Maimane's OneSA Movement also spoke to this group. Indeed, Maimane utilised the Twitter platform quite effectively to advocate for an alternative style of political contestation, particularly advocating strongly for the end to the dominance of political parties. Overall, voters have increasingly and vocally become disillusioned with the dire state of political discourse that has come to characterise South African politics of late.

The working-class community is plagued by unemployment and generally poor prospects in life. Their frustrations were easily harnessed by populist groups who used strawman issues to gain political momentum. Two broad threads of populist rhetoric were used to tap into this group:

- Black Consciousness (BC)-inspired groups such as the EFF and the Radical Economic Transformation (RET) faction of the ANC emphasised the struggle against 'white monopoly capital' and similar groups as the root cause of voters' problems. The term 'white monopoly capital' refers to the idea that white-owned companies and elites control the majority of the wealth and the economy in South Africa. The term had been used in a disinformation campaign in 2017 by now defunct PR-firm Bell Pottinger to suggest that the Gupta family, which had been implicated in grand-scale corruption, were victims of 'white monopoly capital.' This manipulation had the effect of pitting white and black South Africans against each other and continues to be used for political gain today.
- Nationalist and xenophobic groups, including the #PutSouthAfricansFirst (PSAF) political project, and RET-offshoot party, the ATM, and Herman Mashaba's ActionSA, focused on foreigners as the root cause of South Africa's problems, demonising immigrants and calling for tighter border control and immigration policies. Much of this narrative and political campaign also stemmed from disinformation about foreign nationals. This narrative has strong similarities with Donald Trump's anti-foreigner sentiment and 'America First' rhetoric that rocked Twitter throughout much of his presidential campaign.

Radical populists

This broad group was made up of a very clearly defined ideological community. It was the home of the BC-inspired groups and the nationalist and xenophobic groups mentioned above.

In recent years, the RET faction of the ANC and the EFF have increasingly been speaking to the same audience with their BC-inspired rhetoric. We saw a continued emphasis on the strawman issue of white monopoly capital and the failure of the CR17 ANC, and general social justice issues of importance to Black South Africans.

Even as the overlap between RET and EFF rhetoric has grown, these groups' combined audience has been eaten by the rise of the #PutSouthAfricansFirst political project[14]. This hashtag and its anonymous attendant influencers came to prominence seemingly overnight at the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown period in March 2020. Unknown influencers demonised foreigners while more legitimate outlets such as the ATM and ActionSA used the same hashtag but insisted that their focus was on the integrity of South Africa's borders and job markets for locals. Their nationalist calls continued to form a crucial part of their messaging, even as they benefited from the negative sentiment generated towards foreigners by the more strident anonymous accounts.

The use of nationalism tinged with xenophobia proved to be a potent mix for ActionSA, who made massive gains in the Gauteng region in the elections. The PSAF hashtag first gained popularity seemingly overnight during the first lockdown in April 2020, and since then, related xenophobic hashtags have trended on South Africa's Twitter with uncanny frequency. Anonymous accounts such as @uLerato_Pillay (and its many permutations; subsequently discovered to be run by one Sifiso Gwala[15]) and @landback_ push particularly strident content that stereotypes African foreigners as criminals (for example, suggesting that all Nigerians are drug dealers or human traffickers) and accuses them of taking jobs away from hard-working South Africans (such as truck drivers).

While these anonymous influencers' content appear to gain massive engagement on social media, their attempts to translate this into real-world protests on almost a monthly basis in 2020 failed to draw more than a handful of people. This disconnect between its substantial online following and paltry real-world following raises questions about the legitimate, organic nature of the movement.

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[14]Superlinear (2020). Xenophobia, nationalism & populism: What's going on with #PutSouthAfricansFirst?, https://www.superlinear.co.za/xenophobia-nationalism-populism-whats-going-on-with-putsouthafricansfirst/
[15] Jean Le Roux (2020) Xenophobic Twitter Campaigns Orchestrated by a former South African soldier, https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-09-23-xenophobic-twitter-campaigns-orchestrated-by-a-former-south-african-soldier/

The two main political parties known to use the #PutSouthAfricansFirst hashtag are the ATM, accused of being an ANC RET faction offshoot party[16], and Herman Mashaba's ActionSA. Both parties used the hashtag from its inception. The earliest tweets by Herman Mashaba[17] and the ATM leader, Vuyo Zungula[18], were both on 22 and 27 April 2020:

While Mashaba spent much of his campaign emphasising the rule of law, which appears to have appealed to DA voters, he also amplified xenophobic dog whistles, such as this[19] call to deport all Somalis (legally in the country or not) just two weeks before the LGE2021 vote:

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[16] The Citizen (2019) *Magashule and Zuma in secret to help form ATM- report*, https://www.citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/politics/2126429/magashule-and-zuma-met-in-secret-to-help-form-atm-report/
[17] Original tweet: https://twitter.com/HermanMashaba/status/1254773246903238657
[18] Original tweet: https://twitter.com/ZungulaVuyo/status/1254808136696856576
[19] Original tweet: https://twitter.com/hermanmashaba/status/1448898921066074115

Herman Mashaba ✔
@HermanMashaba

As @Action4SA we commit, given a mandate to govern
Municipalities we are contesting to pass By-law to:
1. You have to have SA ID to operate any business
2. Must be registered with SARS
3. Must employ South Africans
4. Will have specialized unit within Metro Police to
execute

8:29 AM · Oct 15, 2021 · Twitter for Android

Did Mashaba and ActionSA's focus on nationalism and xenophobia play a role in their success in the LGE2021? Whatever the reason behind the party's success, its message arguably held strong parallels with the anti-foreigner sentiment that former US President Donald Trump deployed during his election campaign and subsequent presidency, as mentioned earlier.

Minority ideologies and groups

The final group was the most ideologically diverse in some respects; however, most of its ideologies overlapped considerably. It is made up mostly, but not exclusively, of White South Africans.

Many traditional liberals form part of this group, where messaging around humanist ideals, non-racialism and a capable state all resonate. The DA's emphasis on its excellent governance track record also resonated with this group, as did OneSA's messaging. However, the traditional liberal sub-community within this group has shrunk over time as American conservative and libertarian ideas and critiques of concepts such as Critical Race Theory and socialism increasingly pull users into other more conservative, anti-authoritarian or extreme sub-communities within this broader group.

These concepts polarise this group from the rest of South African society as they have shifted towards more conservative, right-leaning (and in some cases, radical) stances that have already become popular within the sub-communities below.

The polarising shift created by imported American conservative and libertarian concepts has led to a conglomerate of overlapping ideologies predominantly, but not exclusively, within the white South African community. This conglomerate of overlapping ideologies includes libertarians, conservatives, conspiracy theorists and an overt [MAGA-style Alt-Right](#)[20].

These groups are all characterised by a deep distrust of official authorities (personified by the ANC — where they do not distinguish between the party's RET and CR17 factions — and the mainstream media). This distrust has opened them up to American-style, individual rights issues such as gun rights, Covid-19 push-back (such as around mask-wearing, vaccine hesitancy, and so on), federalism and regional independence. Parties such as the DA, FF+, ACDP and the Cape Independence Party, among others, emphasised issues such as the failure of the ANC state, so-called socialist policies, and the curtailing of individual freedoms to this conglomerate of ideologies.

Much of this grouping exists within the framework where Covid-19 disinformation is believable. Right-wing ideological beliefs often align with science denialism, and Covid-19 stems from anti-elite, anti-intellectualism, and anti-government views.

Many studies conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic have seen congruency between right-wing politics and resistance to health and safety measures.

> *People tend to be persuaded by speakers they see as knowledgeable (that is, experts), but only when they perceive the existence of common interests. Some citizens, such as ideological conservatives, populists, religious fundamentalists, and the like, may see experts as threatening to their social identities. Consequently, they will be less amenable to expert messages, even in times of crisis. We thus expect citizens with higher levels of anti-intellectualism to perceive less risk from Covid-19, engage in less social distancing and*

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[20] Superlinear (2021). A Diminished MAGA South Africa, https://www.superlinear.co.za/the-hobbling-of-maga-south-africa/

> *mask usage, and more frequently endorse related misperceptions and acquire less pandemic-related information.[21]*

Given this ease of believability, some political parties campaigned on narratives that sought to dispute the existence of Covid-19.

The ACDP persistently campaigned on anti-vaxxer beliefs with no sanction from the IEC. The Cape Party campaigned on contrasting its Covid-19 anti-vaccination beliefs with that of the DA. On 2 October 2021, Cape Independence Party founder, Jack Miller, attended a protest against vaccine passports in Cape Town.
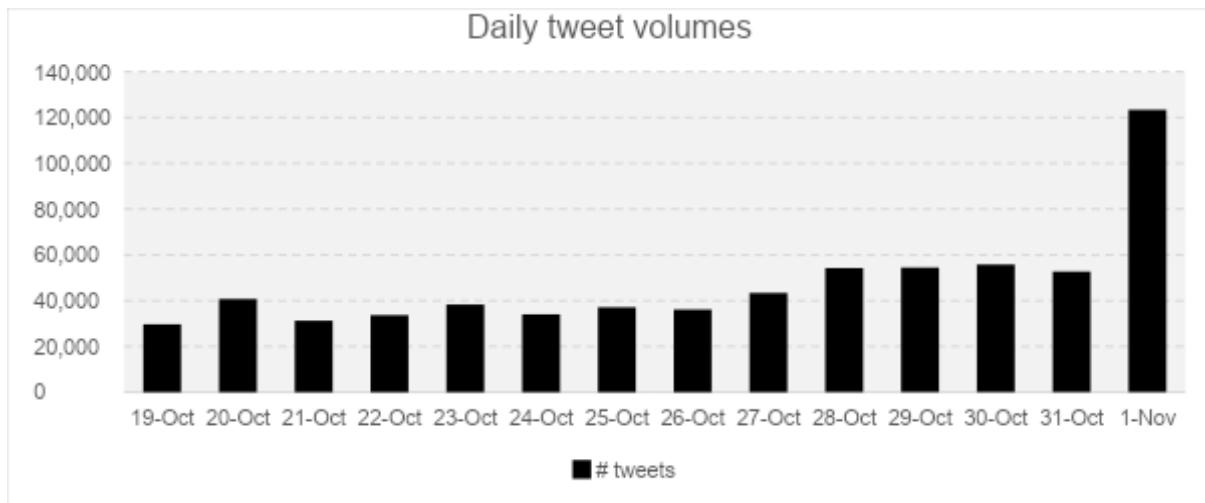
At the rally, Miller was interviewed by News24 which drew parallels between apartheid and recent proposals for a 'vaccine passport', painting the two systems as equivalent and accusing the DA and the ANC of 'tyranny' ([the clip](#) can be viewed on Twitter[22]). The DA had no public statement on vaccine passports, and the party has publicly rejected mandatory vaccines. Therefore, Miller's statement ran afoul of the IEC's code of conduct regarding '*Publishing false information about other candidates or parties*' and might be considered disinformation.

Twitter analysis: What did the overall 2021 elections conversation look like?

South Africans had a lot to say about the local government elections. We collected 855,965 tweets relating to the elections (and there were likely many more generated). To create the dataset, a comprehensive search query was used to net any tweet containing keywords such as '#LGE2021' and 'local government elections'. The chart below summarises the daily tweet volumes collected over the final two weeks leading up to voting day on 1 November 2021:

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[21] Merkley, E., Loewen, P.J. Anti-intellectualism and the mass public's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. *Nat Hum Behav* **5,** 706–715 (2021). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01112-w

[22] https://twitter.com/MarvinCharles_/status/1444255663429931011

Community overview

The underlying 'interaction network' was extracted from the data up until (and including) 1 November. Interaction networks are constructed by connecting Twitter users within a dataset that interacted by either retweeting or @mentioning each other within their tweets. This creates a large, interconnected network structure.

Distinct clusters of users – or 'communities' – were identified within the municipal election interaction network using the Louvain[23] community detection algorithm. The communities identified formed the basis of this analysis as each community related to a specific political party or potential constituency. These communities 'housed' the broad ideological groups that we have already discussed.

Before we look at the resulting interaction network, it is helpful to first revisit what the South African Twitter landscape looked like at the end of 2020[24]:

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[23] Blondel, V. D., Guillaume, J. L., Lambiotte, R., & Lefebvre, E. (2008). Fast unfolding of communities in large networks. Journal of Statistical Mechanics: Theory and Experiment, 10, Article P10008. doi:10.1088/1742-5468/2008/10/P10008

[24] Superlinear (2020). 2020 in Review: The Year Crude Populism and Polarisation Took Hold, https://www.superlinear.co.za/2020-in-review-the-year-crude-populism-and-polarisation-took-hold/
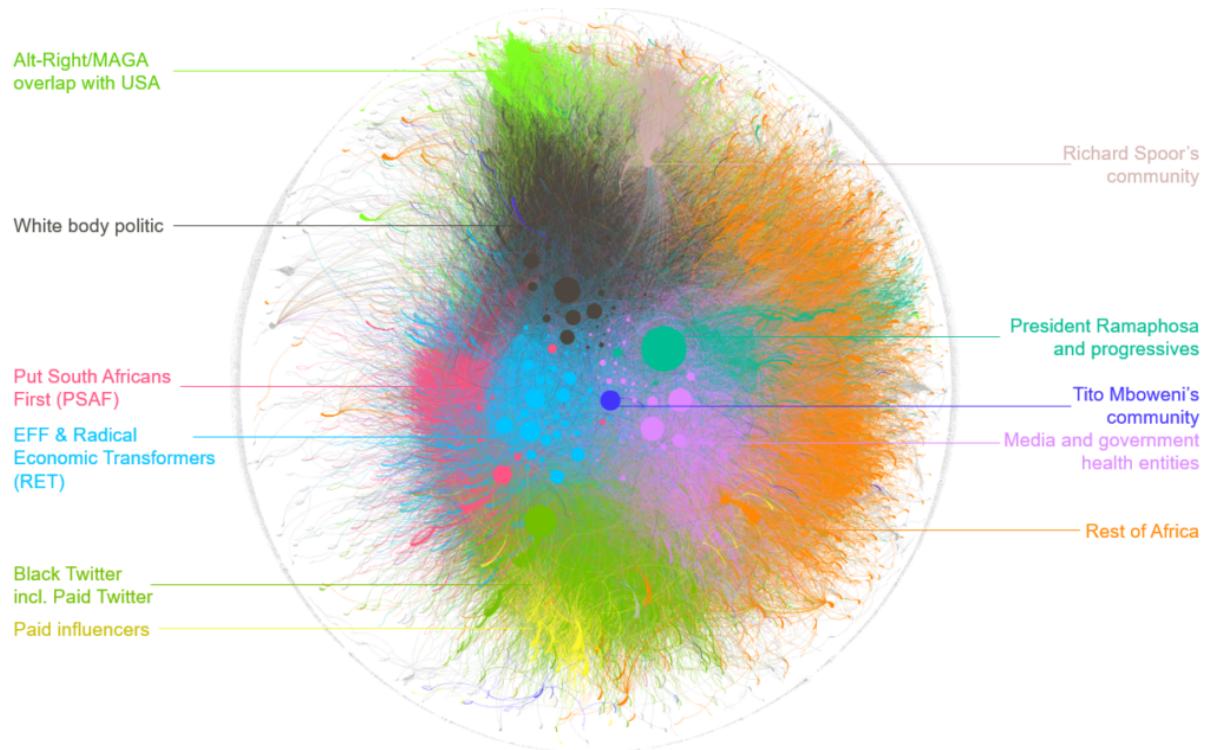
Figure 3: The South African political landscape on Twitter at the end of 2020.[25]

By the end of 2020, South Africa's landscape, as captured on Twitter, had undergone some fundamental shifts, including:
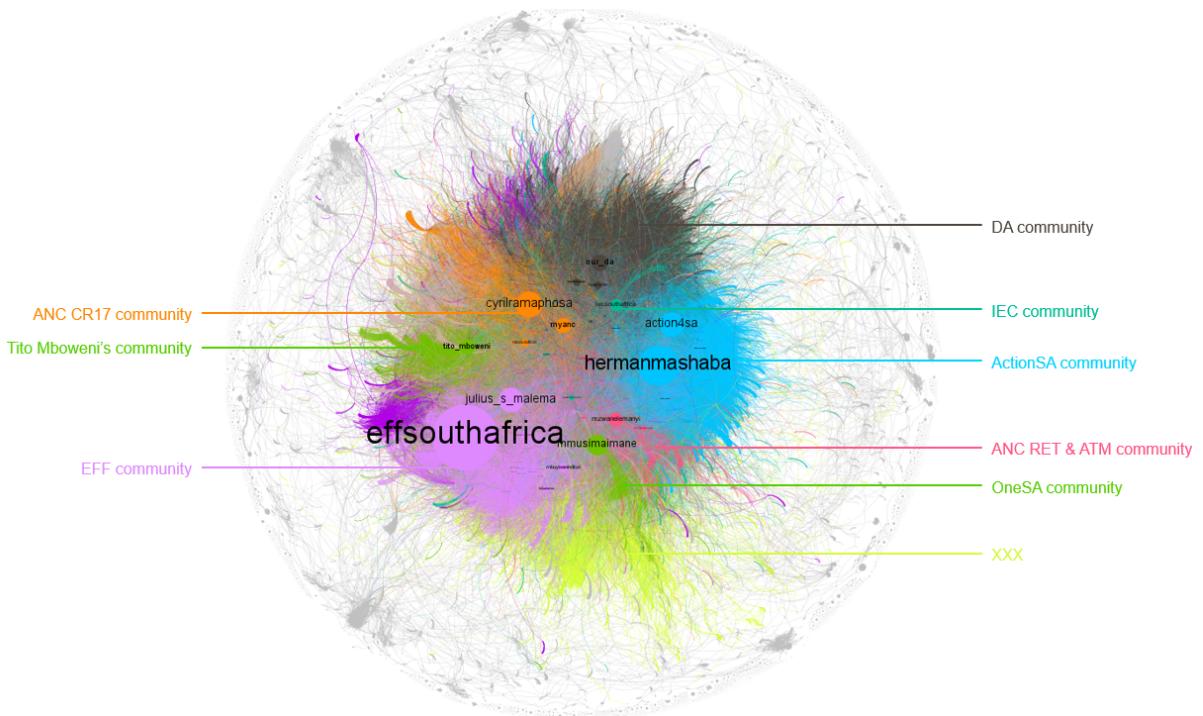
- The merging of radical black consciousness voices on Twitter, as the EFF and RET audiences converged into a single community (they had previously been distinct communities for many years)

- The rise of nationalism and xenophobia galvanised around the #PutSouthAfricansFirst movement, which fed on the radical black consciousness audiences of the EFF and RET factions. The ATM and ActionSA political parties sat within this community

- The increased polarisation of the white body politic away from the rest of South Africa's conversations due to the adoption of US-centric, conservative narratives around, for example, Donald Trump and Covid-19 scepticism. Eurocentric views frequently hold sway amongst these groups as well.

It was within this shifting landscape that new parties were able to find political momentum and insert themselves into our political debates.

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[25]   2020 in review: the year crude populism and polarisation took hold
https://www.superlinear.co.za/2020-in-review-the-year-crude-populism-and-polarisation-took-hold/

The figure below captures the LGE2021 interaction network and highlights the top ten communities, each in a different colour. This gives us an idea of how, and where, new parties were able to insert themselves into, and lay claim to, parts of the political landscape:

The spacing and positioning of users have meaning in the above interaction network. Communities that are close together shared more users – or constituencies - than communities that sat further apart. With this in mind, it is worth pointing out how the following new entrants to the political landscape were able to position themselves.

ActionSA sat between the DA and ANC RET/ATM communities, perhaps implying that their message of rule of law and good governance tapped into the DA's similar message, while ActionSA's strident, borderline xenophobic, messaging around foreigners tapped into similar messaging by the ATM and other RET-related organisations
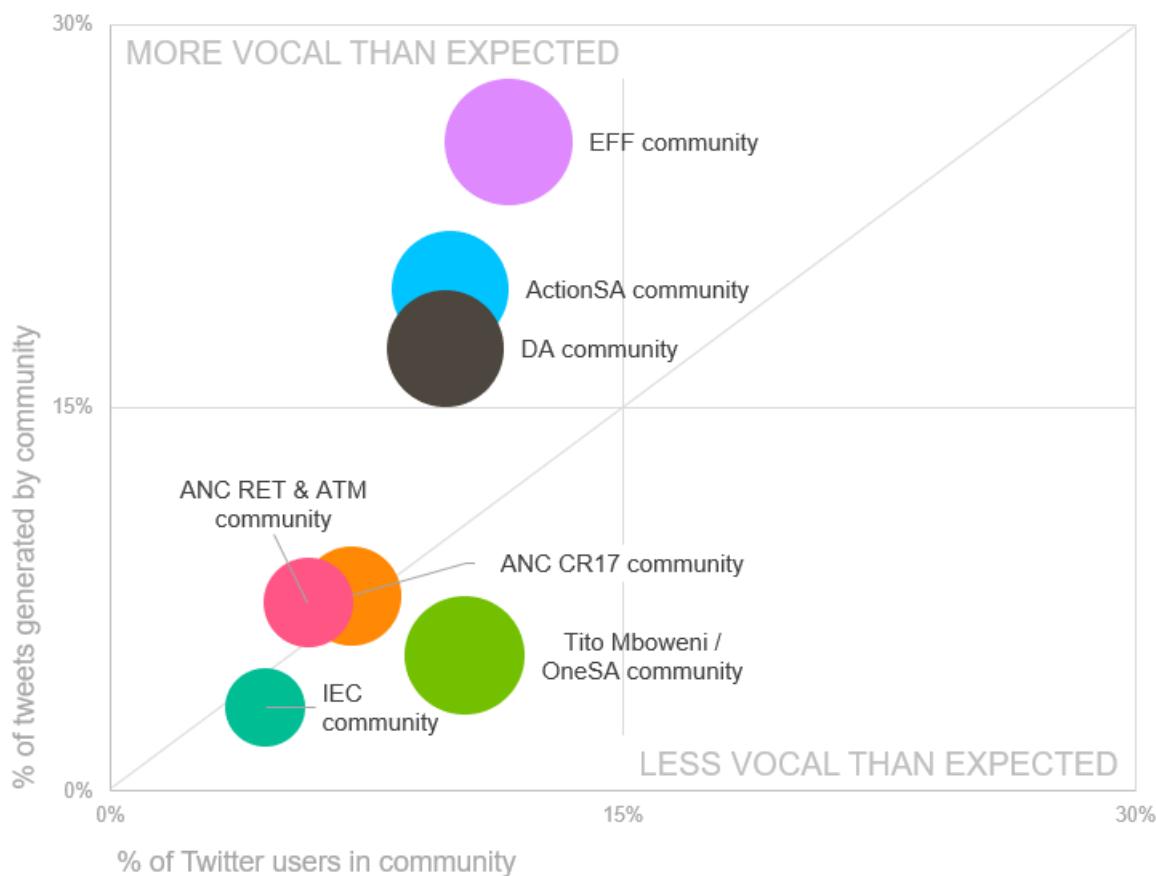
Mmusi Maimane's OneSA movement sat between the ANC RET/ATM community and the EFF community. Has Maimane successfully positioned himself as the moderate voice of frustrated,

disaffected voters who otherwise gravitate towards the more heated rhetoric of the EFF, ANC RET faction and ATM?

Community sizes

Most of the major parties were represented within the top seven communities which contained 59% of users in the dataset discussing the LGE2021 but which collectively generated 86% of all tweets in the dataset.

The below figure summarises the proportion of users in each community (captured on the x-axis and by the bubble sizes) as well as the proportion of all tweets that each community generated (the y-axis):

Communities that sit above the diagonal line generated more tweets than we would expect given the proportion of users in that community. Three communities stood out as particularly vocal on Twitter.

One in four tweets (25%) were generated by the EFF community, underscoring the extent to which that party dominated the platform. However, it also highlights the disconnect between Twitter and the 'real world' where the EFF was only the third-largest party with roughly 10% of votes.

ActionSA, a party that did not exist at the last elections, managed to generate more noise than its leader, Herman Mashaba's, previous political home, the DA. ActionSA truly has arrived on the political map. Its longevity will likely be determined by the extent to which Mashaba will be interested in remaining engaged in party politics and the extent to which the party can make genuine inroads in any future bouts of political contestation, most notably the 2024 National Government Elections.

Trailing far behind, the ANC spoke with two voices: that of the CR17 faction and the RET faction (which was further split by the presence of the ATM party), preventing it from gaining any real political momentum on Twitter. This is likely to be aggravated by the forthcoming 2022 leadership contest which lies ahead for the ANC. The ruling party is likely to find itself engaged in numerous 'Twitter wars' as campaigning commences.

Finally, the IEC maintained a prominent presence of its own as befits an independent institution.

Summary of political messaging on Twitter
What insights can we glean from this Twitter analysis? Disinformation-driven populism was the order of the day, from xenophobia and Covid-19 skepticism, to conservative ideological tropes. 'Facts' - both true and false - were judiciously used to drive self-serving narratives, leading to the following dynamics in our political landscape:
- The South African political spectrum has been expanded. Voters now have more choices, serving more ideological niches than ever before.
- New entrants such as ActionSA and OneSA are not just carbon copy substitutes of existing parties; they have each introduced a unique bouquet of issues, giving them their own positions within the political spectrum. Most importantly, they appear to have undermined the ANC-EFF stranglehold that those parties have on black voters – most of the country – giving Black South Africans more options in an increasingly complex political spectrum.
- The ANC appears to be its own worst enemy. It was not able to gain significant political momentum on Twitter due to its competing factions preventing the party from pushing a consolidated narrative.
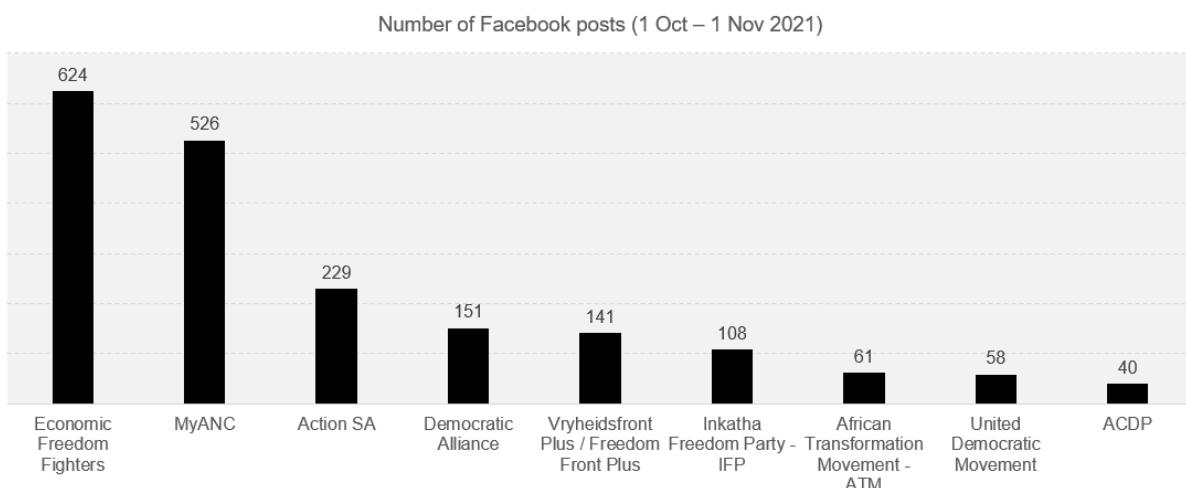
4.2 Analysis of Facebook messaging

Facebook appeared to be used as a more formal channel for party messaging than Twitter. Twitter allows individual party leaders and personalities to espouse their own opinions on a variety of topics and thus gives us a less filtered view of what the party decision-makers really think. In contrast, party presences on Facebook are usually dominated by their official party accounts, which tend to be a source of more curated, official content, making it a good place for understanding each party's official messaging strategy.

The subset of parties monitored in this report posted roughly 2,400 messages to their official Facebook pages in the month leading up to voting day on 1 November. The EFF was again the most prolific, followed by the ANC. A steep drop-off was observed for all other party pages measured:

Number of Facebook posts (1 Oct – 1 Nov 2021)
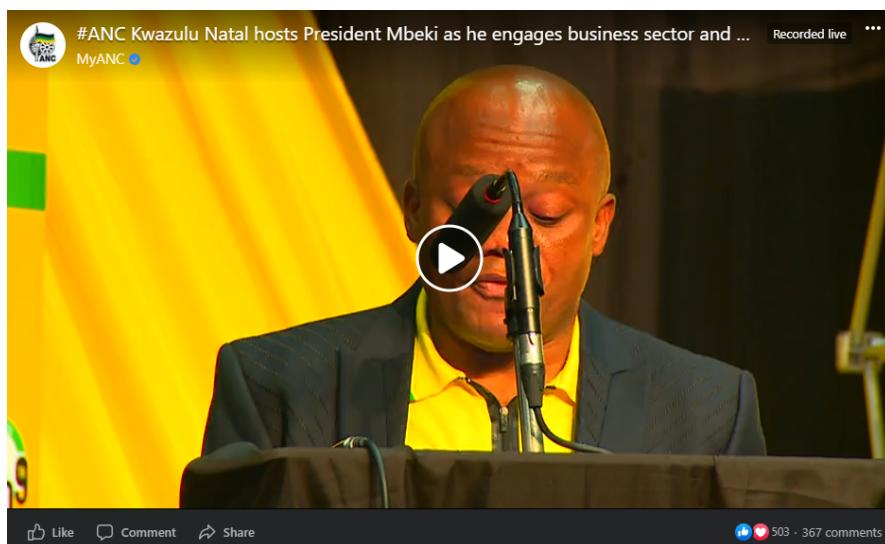
4.2.1 The ANC's messaging

The ANC's campaign messaging was singularly focused on building strong communities as the below wordcloud shows. They shied away from engaging in opposition politics (where parties attack each other directly), preferring to play the ball rather than the player.

Their most popular content emphasised the party's presence on the ground in local communities, implying that it is part of those communities. Similarly, visits to churches and meetings with local businesspeople were used to emphasise the ANC's role in building better communities.

The most popular official ANC post[26] on Facebook was a livestream event with the following description: *'#ANC Kwazulu Natal hosts President Mbeki as he engages business sector and professionals #VoteANC Pres Mbeki Engages with Business Sector and Professionals #ANCinKZN #VoteANC #BuildingBetterCommunities #ANCLGE2021'*

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[26] https://www.facebook.com/190104684357654/posts/595252695149921

4.2.2 The DA's messaging

Like the ANC's focus on 'building better communities', the DA mainly pushed one message: 'the DA gets things done'. They used the example of the DA-run City of Cape Town as an example of what an effective DA-run city looks like. They also engaged in a fair amount of oppositional politics, attacking the ANC for corruption and using the load-shedding issue to emphasise failure.

This post[27] was one of the most popular DA Facebook posts and is a good example of their messaging that 'the DA gets things done':

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[27] https://www.facebook.com/6011868110/posts/10158684552443111

4.2.3 The EFF's messaging

The EFF's messaging was heavily focused around land and jobs, with a strong on-the-ground, community aspect to it.

This popular Facebook post[28] from the official EFF page is a good example of how the party positioned itself as the party of the people:

4.2.4 ActionSA's messaging

ActionSA's Facebook messaging was more formal than its Twitter messaging. Emphasis was placed on ActionSA's on-the-ground community engagements around the issue of service delivery under the slogan of 'Let's fix South Africa'.

Also prominent was the party's spat with the IEC over the party's name not being present on ballots due to an administrative error by the party.

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[28] https://www.facebook.com/269982023142937/posts/2204167383057715

ActionSA's messaging is a tale of two levels of narrative: one around rule of law and delivery; and one around foreigners. The two levels are easily captured in the contrast between their Facebook and Twitter content. Most Facebook content focused on service delivery, with only tangential mentions of foreigners such as the post[29] below. Contrast this with Mashaba's earlier tweet from the previous section of a video calling for the deportation of *all* Somalis:

[29] https://www.facebook.com/102765088210163/posts/395203748966294
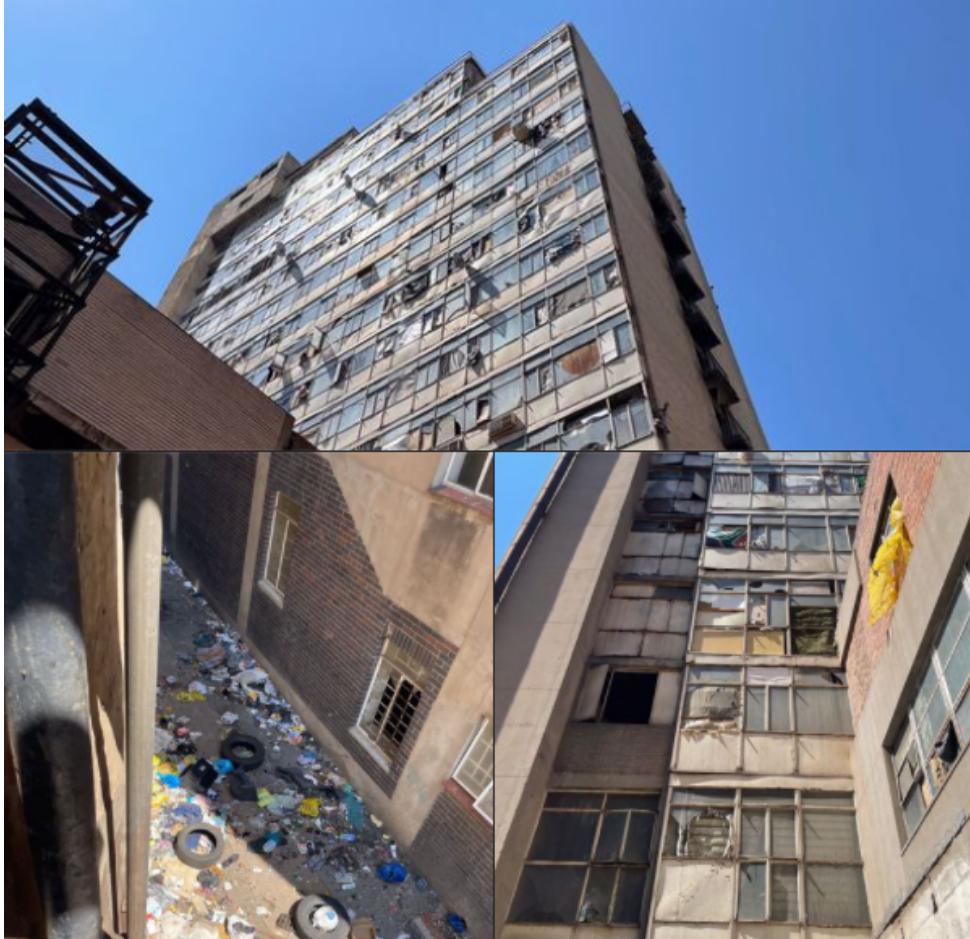
Action SA ✓
20 October · 🌐

The enemy here is not foreigners. The enemy is our government and its poor attempts at immigration control.

The project of revitalising our inner cities requires us to be honest about the population challenges within our cities, and I will not shy away from addressing the challenge unlawful immigration presents on the management of cities and the availability of resources.

Herman Mashaba ✓
20 October · 🌐

Welcome to Remington House in the Johannesburg inner city.

Today we are unveiling our plan to address immigration, revitalise our inner cities, and create vibrant, safe, clean, and inclusive hubs where people from all walks of life can live, work and play.
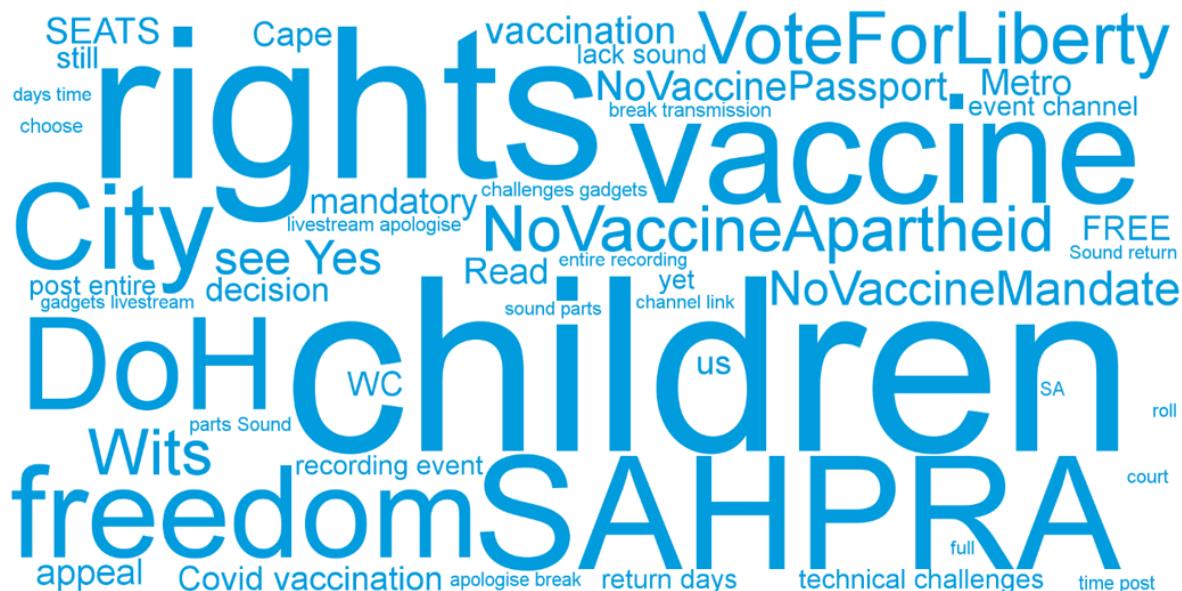
👍❤️ 551   153 comments 26 shares

4.2.5 The ACDP's messaging

While a small party overall, the next two parties are interesting for their choices of messaging, which focused on two age-old populist rhetorical devices:

- Disdain for authority figures and the belief in a global controlling class
- Creating an external enemy by harnessing the fear of the Other (in this case, African immigrants - something which ActionSA also indulged in above.)

The ACDP placed a big bet on the adoption of global Right-Wing issues such as individual freedoms, abortion, and Covid-19 and vaccine scepticism, framed with a mix of US evangelical and libertarian biases. This strategy did not appear to work however given the ACDP's relatively uninspiring results in the elections.

This popular Facebook post[30] is an example of the ACDP's focus on Covid-19 and vaccine scepticism, as well as on US libertarian-style individual rights:

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[30] https://www.facebook.com/379138726819/posts/10158106704861820

4.2.6 The ATM's messaging

Finally, the ATM – a party accused of being an ANC RET faction offshoot, and an early promoter of the nationalist, xenophobic #PutSouthAfricansFirst political project – continued to use the PSAF hashtag in its Facebook content. However, like ActionSA, none of its most popular Facebook posts mentioned foreigners, instead focusing on service delivery. The stereotyping and demonisation of foreigners were left to anonymous accounts on Twitter, while the ATM represented a more formal front on Facebook that emphasised leader Vuyo Zunugula as presidential material. Regardless, the use of the hashtag on Facebook was a clear dog whistle to its core nationalist, xenophobic support base.

A popular ATM Facebook post[31] emphasised its leader, Vuyo Zunugula's, leadership ability without mentioning foreigners directly but while still including the #PutSouthAfricansFirst dog whistle:

CHAPTER 5

BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE ANALYSIS OF SOUTH AFRICA'S DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE ANALYSIS OF SOUTH AFRICA'S DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

Dr David Rosenstein

5.1 Introduction

Disinformation has high costs. It leads to misleading and inaccurate beliefs, which can exacerbate partisan disagreement over even basic facts thus leading to the polarisation of societies. In South Africa, a country marked by a history and a legacy of racial, economic and class division, disinformation-driven attempts to divide and conquer during election cycles are particularly damaging to the country's already tense social and political fabric. Differences in geographical origin, race, class, sexual orientation, and indeed related to falsehoods around Covid-19, have seen violence and deaths. Other than damaging the public discourse and damaging the country's social fabric, this is the alarming impact of disinformation in South Africa.

Disinformation in all its forms is a contemporary crisis of our times. It has the potential to destabilise democracies and political systems. It has a wide range of social and psychological impacts, including the marginalisation of groups and individuals and even mental health deterioration.

Even though people can detect false information, there is still a high risk of susceptibility to disinformation and its deleterious effects because it acts to change biased perceptions and beliefs.

Reading posts with mis/disinformation, especially from political parties who wield significant influence and the ability to change beliefs, even if they appear extremely implausible and inconsistent with our political ideology, can make them subsequently appear as truth. Thus, it is important to consistently analyse from a behavioural science perspective what is being said by parties and how it can serve to further exacerbate inaccurate information. This is in terms of what is said, how it is said, and what changes in beliefs it aims to instil.

5.2 The behavioural science of disinformation

We live in a world where access to information is effortless for almost anyone living in a democratic country with internet access. The amount and variety of ideas on a topic are very broad and our

capacity to discern and detect inconsistencies or problems in the information we read usually is good. However, several factors reduce this capacity, making it far from good.

Firstly, these factors include several processes and constraints within the environments where we engage with information, for example, reading news on our mobile devices. In 2021, 60.71% of the South African population accessed the internet via mobile devices. This share is projected to grow to 67.48% in 2026.[32]

 Secondly, intrinsic factors concern the way we process information cognitively, for example, the way we read a shared piece of news forwarded to us by a family member on social media. Because access to information has become easy and fast, and there are fewer barriers to its immediate entry (you don't need to buy a newspaper or go to a library), there has been a reduction in the amount of attention and effort utilised when processing and engaging with information. The way we engage with information, especially on social media, is often done while doing other activities simultaneously; we are constantly multi-tasking and dividing our attention.

In addition, the volume of associated information relating to a specific topic may also mean that an individual is less likely to consult a single source but rather examine many. Although this can be good, it also means that authorities are often expected to be read more cursorily.

Our capacity to be critical of information we read is often constrained by the amount of attention given. Should we be distracted by competing social media demands, or our attention be divided by other activities, our capacity to scrutinise and detect fake or problematic information effectively will be reduced substantially. This is because we are constrained by a brain that has a biologically hardwired, limited capacity to pay attention. The more our attention is divided, the more we lose the considerable ability to pay attention accurately.

We are all destitute at multitasking. We know from extensive scientific data that we are prone to errors and have much poorer memory recall when our attention is divided. We are prone to developing more false memories when our attention is constrained.

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[32] Statisica: Mobile internet user penetration in South Africa from 2016 to 2026
https://www.statista.com/statistics/972866/south-africa-mobile-internet-penetration/

Also, it is worth mentioning that paying attention accurately with little distraction is essential when engaging with political information and news, which affects our livelihood, future, and those around us. Distraction is a specifically necessary process when disinformation is disseminated through social media. There is a much higher likelihood of distraction or reduced 'attentional' capacity when engaging with information on social media. Therefore, there is greater susceptibility to disinformation disseminated explicitly on social media.

Attention is not the only mechanism that leaves us susceptible to disinformation. Our beliefs may also prevent us from detecting disinformation. This is especially true if our thoughts are consistent with even some aspects of disinformation we are likely to come across.

This is what behavioural scientists may often call a confirmation bias. Even if we detect what we have just read as disinformation, if it is consistent with what we already believe, it may also mean that we will be unlikely to do anything about it. There is scientific data from the behavioural sciences, which shows that even when individuals can detect that disinformation is false, they are unlikely to disregard it if it aligns with their own beliefs. Therefore, in cases where political disinformation is consistent with an individual's narrative or belief system, even though the individual can detect that what they are reading is fake or bogus, it often means that they will not call it out or disregard it. Disinformation, therefore, serves to promulgate specific political ideas and fictions that expediently promote individual and group agendas.

There is also evidence that suggests exposure to fake news stories enhances the likelihood of developing false memories. In addition, an individual whose political ideology is in some way congruent with the information portrayed in a fake news story is more susceptible to developing false memories. Individuals who have political ideologies congruent with phoney news stories also demonstrate a more significant number of false memories that reflect more poorly towards opposing positions to what they believe. It is essential to state that reasoning and deliberation have a more substantial role in discerning truth from fiction than the congruence of a person's political ideology with the fake story. However, political unity is more strongly associated with the message's general belief than the quality and amount of reasoning and deliberation.

5.3 Disinformation strategies used in the South Africa elections

During the 2021 elections, political parties often used emotive socio-political issues as an expedient vehicle for obtaining voter interest. For example, this has been seen where some political parties used

populist rhetoric and xenophobia to galvanise their voters. Most people can identify disinformation if they give careful consideration. However, as we have established, this is unlikely to happen should the individual's political views be congruent with the disinformation content. More nationalist and xenophobic groups such as PSAF and ATM focused on foreigners as the root cause of South Africa's problems, demonising immigrants and calling for tighter border control and immigration policies.

From a behavioural science perspective, populist attitudes have many similarities to conspiratorial beliefs on the individual level. For example, the common belief in conspiracies of greedy, evil elites has been associated with populist ideas. In addition, populist aptitudes such as people centrism, anti-elitism, and good-versus-evil views of politics have all been related to conspiratorial thinking. This kind of thinking is evident in how conspiratorial and populist thinking are likely to see the masses as victims of a smaller elite group.

Conspiratorial beliefs are challenging to change, and strategies to change these beliefs risk backfiring and making them stronger. These kinds of ideas also generate strong emotional responses in individuals. Disinformation strategies that use emotive messaging are likely to evoke stronger and more severe reactions in individuals who share political beliefs. Emotionally strong messages are also more likely to be passed on than messaging that is less emotional or neutral, despite how factually accurate the information is. The more emotive a story is, the more willing people are to disseminate it. This has been observed widely in various social media posts containing Covid-19 vaccine disinformation.

Experts can couch cogently stated arguments that do not appear to be quickly assessed as inconsistent or fake and are compelling in their presentation of information and ideas. The problem with misinformation which is couched in either cogent arguments or strongly emotive messages, is that it becomes very stable and is hard to eliminate. Individuals integrate this information into their prior knowledge and belief systems- and changing these beliefs is often very difficult.

During an election time, a common strategy used by political parties is to attack other parties. Although these strategies are often not deliberate disinformation attempts, several observed attacks during the South African municipal elections contained false and fake information. These attacks are some of the most robust emotive strategies a political party can use. These attempts to attack other parties can increase depressing overall voter participation, especially when these attacks are strongly biased and are disinformation attempts. Campaigns that attack an opposing candidate act to turn off those who might have supported the candidate being attacked and turn all voters off. These kinds of

negative campaigns, especially utilising disinformation strategies, are likely to have the effect of reducing the sense of civic duty felt by voters. This would be an overall detrimental effect of motivating people to vote.

5.4 Challenges combating disinformation

As we have now established, the ability for people to detect false and misleading information is dependent on several factors. Some of these pertain to the way people process and evaluate information, news, and social media. These factors include the person's prior beliefs, whether enough effort and attention are expended during reading and whether there is critical/thoughtfulness during reading.

To promote these strategies, many anti-disinformation experts employ debunking strategies, often counter-publications to established disinformation media. One of the biggest challenges using debunking as an anti-disinformation strategy is that even with good debunking and correction of the original disinformation, it can continue to influence judgments and conclusions. Once a thought and belief system are formed or affected by disinformation, it cannot be easily undone.

Anti-disinformation experts will rely on other strategies besides just correction and debunking. These would also include educating people that they may be influenced by information they read even though they believe they will not. In addition, consideration should be given to the attempts to correct misinformation. There is scientific evidence that suggests that complex arguments against disinformation may backfire. This is because the information that is easy to process may be considered valid and falls within our capacity for confirmation error/bias. Confirmation error is our tendency to agree with the information that confirms or agrees with our already held beliefs. This also affects how we search for information. We are more likely to search for information that confirms our previously held beliefs than update or challenge those beliefs.

In addition, there is also scientific research that has found that attempts to debunk disinformation make it stronger. Another mechanism that may account for this is that disinformation congruent with an individual's belief is also familiar. A process whereby a belief is to be debunked often starts with introducing the original problematic information to provide a counter argument. In doing so, the individual is re-introduced to information they are already familiar with, which can further reinforce the belief and associated thinking.

These effects are much worse when we are not willing to engage with content effortfully or are distracted. Good scientific evidence suggests that strategic thinking and engaging effortfully (and critically) with intention can circumvent some of these biases and reduce the effects that biases may have on our information processing and, therefore, disinformation detection and correction. Therefore, we cannot merely point out disinformation to those most likely to be affected. We also need to teach individuals how to approach information more critically and diligently. If people employ a passive and distracted approach to the information they read, they open themselves to disinformation.

CHAPTER 6

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS' RESPONSE TO DISINFORMATION DURING THE ELECTION CYCLE

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS' RESPONSE TO DISINFORMATION DURING THE ELECTION CYCLE

Phumzile van Damme

6.1 Introduction

As part of its goals, the project sought to do some advocacy work around the importance of social media platforms doing their part in protecting the 2021 election against electoral disinformation. With little to no efforts made by social media platforms to curb mis/disinformation in South Africa's most recent election in 2019, it was imperative to push for the platforms to take a far stronger stance against mis/disinformation.

The core of our advocacy was not to only perpetually point out what is wrong but also to provide implementable solutions. We aimed to shift the conversation from what is wrong to what could be done by the platforms to improve their policies and actions around combating mis/disinformation.

To this end, we sought to approach the various social media platforms to get their commitment to sign a pledge to take action against disinformation during the election cycle, focusing on South Africa-specific issues. This would largely be symbolic of their commitment as it was impossible to get the platforms to sign a legally binding pledge.

A combative approach has led to an acrimonious relationship between legislators and activists against mis/disinformation and the platforms. This has resulted in social media platforms adopting a defensive and obstinate attitude to dispel criticism. Social media platforms are here to stay, and a collaborative, open and solutions-focused relationship needs to be built with the platform's executives to bring about real change in their misinformation combating effort.

The pledge would also provide a tool that we could use to measure the platforms' performance in curbing mis/disinformation and gauge whether their commitments were upheld.

A barrier to achieving this goal was the fact that the platforms were already in talks with the IEC regarding their electoral mis/disinformation efforts. This means that only vague commitments were given instead of detailed plans that could be assessed.

The only platform willing to engage in real discussions with us was Facebook. A meeting was held, and a document was provided detailing what Facebook's Southern Africa office would be doing against electoral mis- and disinformation.

It is worth noting that ahead of the 2021 election, the IEC partnered with Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) to fight the spread of electoral disinformation. MMA's Real411 platform provided a channel for the public to report disinformation during the election cycle.

While both the Real411 platform and the Electoral Court provide a valuable service by providing a platform for the public to report disinformation directly, it does little to contain the spread of harmful disinformation. Mis/disinformation virality often spreads to millions and becomes entrenched as truth before the IEC and the Electoral Court can investigate. This process requires modernisation and overhaul to consider that political campaigns take place online. In Chapter 7, we provide recommendations for improving this process.

The IEC also worked with social media platforms Google, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok to tackle election disinformation. The IEC indicated that social media platforms have appointed persons or teams during the election period to prioritise referrals from it. The platforms would act according to their existing moderation policies. However, unlike in the US, there was no indication of the implementation of election-specific moderation policies. It was business as usual.

The success of this partnership remains to be seen. The IEC has not published a report about the amount of disinformation it has encountered, reported to the platforms, and how it was combated. Similarly, the platforms have not divulged any reports, perhaps hiding behind the IEC to escape scrutiny.

Below, we analyse the responses by mainly Facebook and Twitter to electoral disinformation. The two were selected by virtue of being the public platforms where most political engagement for South African social media users occurs.

6.2 Facebook

We are grateful for Facebook Southern Africa's Policy Head, Nomonde Gongxeka-Seopa agreeing to a meeting to discuss the platforms' efforts to curb electoral mis/disinformation as well as answer our questions. She also provided the below letter to us explaining the steps Facebook had in place for the duration of the election.

Preparations for the South Africa elections - 2021

Protecting the integrity of elections while preserving freedom of expression, is a top priority for Facebook. Every election is important to us, including elections across Africa, where we are undertaking ongoing work in reducing misinformation, *removing voter suppression, preventing election interference, supporting civic engagement, and increasing transparency in political advertising. We established an internal task-force that looks into the biggest risks and challenges in the lead up to and following the upcoming Local Government Elections.*

Over the past months, we've trained political parties and the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) on best practices for organic content, our transparency requirements for ads about politics and elections, our Community Standards, and our work to prevent interference and keep our platforms safe. We've also developed a dedicated landing page aimed at equipping candidates and political parties with key resources on how to reach and engage their supporters during the election period. See here: South African Local Government Elections

We've also launched a radio campaign across a number of community stations to educate the public on our Community Standards, which will run in the lead-up to and following the election. On Election Day, we'll display a voting day reminder at the top of Facebook's news feed linking to the IEC website and launch localised Instagram stickers allowing people to post that they voted and encourage their followers to go vote.

Launching ads transparency requirements in South Africa

In June of this year, we introduced political ads transparency requirements to South Africa. Anyone who wants to run ads about elections or politics in South Africa must now go through a verification process to prove who they are and that they are based in South Africa. These ads are labelled with a 'Paid for by' disclaimer, so you can see who paid for them, they are stored in our public Ads Library for seven years, so that everyone can see what ads are running, who saw them and how much was spent. We also offer controls so that people in South Africa can choose to see fewer political ads.

Combating misinformation through collaboration with local partners

We are working closely with our local Third-Party Fact-Checking (3FPC) Partners AFP & AfricaCheck to review and rate potentially false content on Facebook, label it, and reduce its distribution in News Feed, so fewer people see it. The seven official languages supported include Zulu, English, Afrikaans, Sotho, Northern Sotho, Setswana, and Northern Ndebele.

Broader elections integrity tools and strategies

We're doing more than ever to protect and preserve the integrity of the upcoming election, based on the lessons we have learnt working on over 200 elections around the world. That said, we're using input from South African experts and policymakers across the political spectrum to inform our work. In addition, we have made substantial investments in teams and technologies to better secure elections and we are deploying them where they will have the greatest impact.

We now have 40,000 people around the world working on safety and security. Their job is to monitor for suspicious activity, quickly identify content and behaviour that violates our policies, remove it, and prevent it from being used again. We have invested more than $13 billion in teams and technology in this area since 2016 and have 40 teams involved in this work – with more than 500 people tasked solely to elections.

Our strategy to protect elections not only applies during critical times, but year-round, and is centered around three areas:

1. Preventing interference;
2. Removing harmful content and reducing misinformation;
3. Increasing transparency

i. Preventing interference

A key part of our strategy to prevent interference is working with government authorities, law enforcement, security experts, civil society and other tech companies to stop emerging threats by establishing a direct line of communication, sharing knowledge and identifying opportunities for collaboration.

We have advanced our security operations to take down manipulation campaigns and identify emerging threats. Our teams of expert investigators actively look for and take down coordinated

networks of inauthentic accounts, Pages and Groups that seek to manipulate public debate. We updated our *inauthentic behaviour policy* to improve further our ability to counter new tactics and more quickly act against the spectrum of deceptive practices we see on our platforms - whether foreign or domestic, state or non-state. Since 2017, Facebook's security teams have disrupted and removed more than 150 covert influence operations, both foreign and domestic, helping prevent similar abuse. Moreover, our advanced AI means we now disable more than a million fake accounts per day at the point of creation.

ii. Removing harmful content and reducing misinformation

We are committed to stopping the spread of misinformation. We use a combination of enforcement technology, human review and independent fact-checkers to identify, review and take action on this type of content. We use a three-part strategy - remove, reduce, and inform.

- **Remove:** *We remove content that violates our Community Standards, including fake accounts and accounts engaged in inauthentic behaviour, misinformation that may contribute to the risk of imminent violence or harm, voter fraud or interference, hate speech, bullying and harassment. We also remove ads that violate our Advertising Policies, including ads with debunked claims by third-party fact-checkers or, in certain circumstances, by authoritative bodies, as well as our Community Standards.*
- **Reduce:** *Problematic content that does not meet the standards for removal under our Community Standards but still undermines the authenticity of the platform, such as clickbait and content debunked by our third-party fact- checkers, are demoted in the News Feed. This significantly reduces the number of people on Facebook and Instagram who see that content.*
- **Inform:** *We help prevent the spread of misinformation by providing additional context and connecting them with accurate information so people can make informed decisions. Here are some examples:*
- **Misinformation labels:** *Content across Facebook and Instagram that has been rated false or partly false by our fact-checkers are prominently labeled so people can better decide for themselves what to read, trust, and share.*
- **Connecting people to accurate and authoritative information**: *We launch products, such as Voter Registration and Election Day Reminders, to connect people with accurate information about when and how to vote.*
- **Additional context about content people share:** *We've introduced a new notification screen that lets people know when news articles they are about to share are more than 90 days old.*

- **Media & digital literacy:** *We are also investing in media and digital literacy initiatives to raise awareness and help people be more critical about the information they see. Earlier this year in collaboration with WHO, we launched a* worldwide campaign *to educate people on how to spot misinformation relating to vaccines.*

iii. Increasing transparency

We believe increased transparency leads to increased accountability. We provide an industry- leading level of transparency around political advertising and pages so people can see who is trying to influence them. This includes:

- **Verifying Political Advertisers:** *To run an ad about politics or elections, advertisers must go through our* authorisation process, *which includes proving who they are and where they live.*
- **Political and Issue Ads:** *Ads about elections or politics in South Africa must include 'Paid for by' disclaimers to show who's behind the ad. These ads are then housed in a public searchable* Ad Library. *Each month more than 3 million people globally, including many South Africans, use the Add Library to make more than 50 million searches about who funded an ad, a range of how much they spent, and the reach of the ad across demographics.*
- **Page Transparency:** *On Facebook, we show information about a Page, such as when it was created, name changes, and the location(s) of the Page admins. We will also start labeling media outlets that we believe are wholly or partially under the editorial control of their government as* state-controlled media.
- **News Feed Ranking:** *People can click on '*Why Am I Seeing This*' in posts and ads to understand why they are seeing them and control what they see from friends, Pages and Groups in the News Feed. This is the first time that we've built information on how ranking works directly into the app.*

At face value, this might read as an indication that Facebook was taking the issue of political disinformation seriously and has put measures in place to curb it. However, without the data, it is hard to independently scrutinise Facebook's success. We asked Facebook Southern Africa to provide information about the success of their efforts but we were suddenly stonewalled. This lack of transparency contradicts its commitment as stated in their response, and is not in line with its actions in response to the US election.[33]

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[33] https://about.facebook.com/actions/preparing-for-elections-on-facebook/

Following the US election, within a month, Facebook published a report which provided the following data:

US 2020 Presidential Election by the Numbers

BETWEEN MARCH 1 AND ELECTION DAY

Displayed warnings on

180M+

pieces of content debunked by third-party fact-checkers that were viewed on Facebook by people in the US

Removed more than

265,000

pieces of content on Facebook and Instagram in the US for violating our voter interference policies

Rejected ad submissions

3.3M

times before they could be run for targeting the US with ads covering Social Issues, Elections and Politics without completing the authorizations process

Helped an estimated

4.5 million

people register to vote this year across Facebook, Instagram, and Messenger and helped an estimated

100,000

people sign up as poll workers*

140 million

people visited the Voting Information Center since it launched, with over

33 million

people visiting it on Election Day alone

Since October 2019,

took down influence operations

targeting the US, including 5 networks engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) from Russia, 5 from Iran, 1 from China, and 5 domestic US-origin networks

Removed more than

4.5 billion

fake accounts in 2020 — almost all identified before anyone flagged them to us

*based on conversion rates we calculated from a few states we partnered with

The seeming lack of effort and care is in line with how Facebook has responded to misinformation on the African continent and the Global South as revealed in the Facebook Papers.[34]

> *'Facebook is aware that its products are being used to facilitate hate speech in the Middle East, violent cartels in Mexico, ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia, extremist anti-Muslim rhetoric in India, and sex trafficking in Dubai. It is also aware that its efforts to combat these things are insufficient. A March 2021 report notes, 'We frequently observe highly coordinated, intentional activity ... by problematic actors' that is 'particularly prevalent—and problematic—in At-Risk Countries and Contexts'; the report later acknowledges, 'Current mitigation strategies are not enough.'*[35]

The Facebook Papers also confirmed the platform's lax attitude towards the African continent:

- Facebook chronically underinvests in non-Western countries, leaving millions of users exposed to disinformation, hate speech, and violent content.

- Facebook has not invested enough in the language- and dialect-specific artificial intelligence and staffing it needs to address these problems. Only 13% of Facebook's misinformation-moderation staff hours were devoted to the non-US countries in which it operates, but whose populations comprise more than 90% of Facebook's users.

- Misinformation and hate speech circulate widely on Facebook in Ethiopia, inflaming ethnic violence in the country's ongoing civil war. Facebook knew it was being used to incite violence in Ethiopia. It did little to stop the spread.

- A group of Facebook researchers had found numerous Instagram profiles being used as advertisements for trafficked domestic workers as early as March 2018. Facebook's response to this problem came in late 2019. By then, it was a little too late.

Did Facebook succeed in protecting South Africa's 2021 election against electoral disinformation? It did not. In a space where Facebook has ignored requests for data and information regarding their work in South Africa, it is still possible to tell that it failed. As a start, South Africa has 11 official languages in users' posts and their moderation efforts would not have succeeded unless moderators knew South Africa's 10 other languages, other than English.

Furthermore, the lack of attention is exemplified because none of the measures implemented for the US election was put in place in South Africa. Unlike the US election, Facebook did not:

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[34] Rest of the World (26 October 2021) 'The Facebook Papers reveal staggering failures in the Global South' https://restofworld.org/2021/facebook-papers-reveal-staggering-failures-in-global-south/
[35] The Atlantic (25 October 2021) *'How Facebook Fails 99 Percent of its Users'* https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/facebook-failed-the-world/620479/

- Include Voting Information Centres on Facebook and Instagram to provide official information from election authorities to help people prepare for the election;

- Label media outlets that are wholly or partially under the editorial control of their government to provide greater transparency;

- Provide Political Branded Content Live Displays using CrowdTangle, Facebook's social media monitoring tool, to let social media users see what leaders of political parties are saying on Facebook and Instagram, as well as branded content they sponsored;

- Add warnings to posts that are debunked by fact-checkers; or

- Use Facebook Protect to secure the accounts of elected officials, candidates and their staff.

6.3 Twitter

We reached out to Twitter's Head of Public Policy for Sub-Saharan Africa, Emmanuel Lubanzadio. His response to us read:

> *'Regarding the election, we are already working with our local partners and the Electoral Commission in preparation for the election.'*

In a press statement[36] announcing the IEC's collaboration with social media platforms to tackle mis/disinformation, Lubanzadio provided further insight regarding Twitter's strategy for the South African election:

> *'Twitter's number one priority is the health of the public conversation, and we are deeply committed to protecting and supporting election conversations around the world. We recognise the role Twitter plays in political discourse and will continue to ensure that those using the service are doing so in a safe and secure manner. Since 2019, we have banned political adverts as we believe political reach should be earned, not bought.'*

It is difficult to scrutinise Twitter's efforts during the election as a report regarding its operations and achievements during the South African election has not been provided or made public. Again, unlike

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[36] *Partnership with MMA to combat disinformation in municipal elections – IEC*
https://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/partnership-to-combat-disinformation-in-municipal-

in the US, Twitter did not implement the same measures. It is a global company with a footprint in many countries across the world, and where uniformity regarding electoral disinformation exists.

During the South African election, Twitter did not:

- Provide regular updates[37] regarding its work related to the election.
- Prevent users on Twitter, including candidates for office, from claiming an election win before it is authoritatively called. To determine the results of an election in the US, Twitter required either an announcement from state election officials or a public projection from at least two authoritative, national news outlets that make independent election calls.
- Add election labels[38] to make it easier for users to identify South African political parties and political leaders with large follower numbers. It is of course not possible to do so for all candidates, but the ones with large follower numbers and high engagement ought to have had election labels.
- Label tweets that violate its policies against misleading information about civic integrity, and synthetic and manipulated media, including a prompt to users to defer to credible information about the topic before they can amplify it.
- Add additional warnings and retweet restrictions on tweets with misleading information.
- Partner with news organisations, journalists, and election officials to provide updates from official sources. Twitter had endeavoured to use @TwitterGov to provide information about elections worldwide. Not a single tweet was posted about the South African election.

Twitter misinformation failings have had a severe impact in South Africa. In July 2021 the country experienced rioting, looting, and violence unprecedented since the advent of democracy. Using a combination of desktop research and social media analytics tools, the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) identified 12 Twitter accounts responsible for inciting violence on social media during the recent unrest in South Africa.[39]

South African Twitter users reported the account en masse but the response from Twitter never came despite the tweets being in violation of its Glorification of Violence policy.[40] Responses to user reports

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[37] Twitter (12 November 2021) *An update on our work around the 2020 US Elections*
https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/2020-election-update
[38] https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/election-labels
[39] 20 July 2021 *'The Dirty Dozen & The Amplification of Incendiary Content During the Outbreak of Unrest in South Africa July 2021'*
https://cabc.org.za/2021/07/30/the-dirty-dozen-the-amplification-of-incendiary-content-during-the-outbreak-of-unrest-in-south-africa-july-2021/
[40] https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/glorification-of-violence

about the incitement of violence were only responded to weeks later. By then, more than 300 people had died in the violence. To date, the 12 accounts continue to exist on Twitter.

Compare this to Twitter's response to the abuse of teams competing in the Euro2020 Football Final in the same month as the unrest in South Africa. Following abuse targeting members of the England team on the night of the final, Twitter identified and removed 1,622 tweets during the final and in the 24 hours that followed, with over 90% of the Tweets detected proactively. Offending accounts were suspended. Twitter most certainly did not succeed in curbing electoral mis/disinformation.

CHAPTER 7

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1. General recommendations

The following recommendations were made by the project partners individually and collectively.

Social media laws: the need for discussions about social media regulation
There is a distinctive need for deep discussion about South African legislation surrounding mis/disinformation. The law must keep up with technological developments. There is also a need for stricter guidelines for the conduct on social media platforms to stem the tide of disinformation that has engulfed South Africans, most notably during the local government elections. However, this discussion must happen at a global level, with strict protections against authoritarian regimes using such laws to clampdown on freedom of speech on social media in their respective countries. A global standard for the oversight of social media companies, which operate in many countries around the world, is needed with a body established with oversight and sanction powers.

The IEC Code of Conduct needs to be amended to explicitly provide a very tight definition of what constitutes **dis**information. To get buy-in from political parties, it must be limited to disinformation with demonstrable **intent,** as is necessary in South Africa's common law. Such a definition would have to be carefully drafted to be water-tight and not leave the possibility of being struck down by the courts. This will require extensive research and legal expertise.

The application of the IEC Code of Conduct once the election date is proclaimed does not take into account the virality of disinformation, and how it becomes entrenched as fact. A wholescale re-drafting of the IEC Code of Conduct to consider the online space as a significant space where political parties contest is required.

Academia
There is also a distinctive need for greater scholarly engagement with regards to the study of mis/disinformation, with the need to incorporate the topic more prominently in university curricula, where possible and applicable. This could/should include seminars or modules focusing on political communication and interdisciplinary studies of the phenomenon in collaboration with journalism and political science departments. academia, and in particular behavioural scientists and psychologists

ought to spearhead discussions about what behavioural change strategies would be most effective to change the manner in which users interact with information online.

The role of political parties

Greater coordination between political parties should be encouraged to promote political tolerance on various social media platforms, including most notably Twitter and Facebook. Political parties should proactively revise their social media policies to ensure that more robust checks are put into place to curb disinformation being spread by political party leadership or active party supporters.

The role of the IEC

There is an urgent need for the IEC to more proactively provide feedback and consistently communicate to the electorate on disinformation during and after the election season. Acts of disinformation continue on a daily basis and require a far more robust response from the IEC to stem its tide. The IEC should also be provided with the enhanced ability to mete out more punitive sanctions for acts of disinformation that may have been committed by political parties.

The next section briefly discusses specific recommendations made by the respective project partners.

7.2 Lazola Kati

1. Verifying/fact-checking

As consumers of information and knowledge, we must learn to fact-check. As a South African society, we have not taken time to understand and learn the process of verifying facts. We have had many instances where even media houses have not fact-checked and have released erroneous stories. We need to build that skill in information access.

The South African Local Government Elections 2021 revealed a leadership that does not care to speak to facts. Mis/disinformation has become a campaign strategy. We saw instances where voters were promised the increase of social grants, RDP houses, and a long, carefully created narrative around foreign nationals being the link to issues in South Africa.

There is a need to create a critical pool of people who question information and to have a clear mechanism to report mis/disinformation. What has been clear is that there wasn't a thorough understanding of the dangers of both misinformation and disinformation. There was much confusion

around the terms. There appears to have been a revelation for many South Africans around how purposeful disinformation is compared to misinformation.

2. Understanding Rules and Regulations

People should read and understand the rules and regulations around elections or any process they engage in. Election material and information is widely available, and we need to be a society that understands the laws we are governed by. It makes it easier to pick up mis/disinformation by political parties even in regular rallies, public addresses and community meetings and forums. People need to ask politicians to qualify statements in some of these settings.

3. Reporting

South Africans need to learn a clear mechanism to report irregularities. In many instances, communities reached out to the Anti-Disinformation Project relaying information containing disinformation. We also had many instances, mainly on live radio interviews, where members of communities would call in to report disinformation cases. It then became imperative to emphasise reporting mechanisms around disinformation and elections. Many communities were unaware of the reporting or complaints process around disinformation during elections. This is also fuelled by the culture of silence and a measure of passiveness around disinformation disseminated by political parties during elections.

The examples of disinformation during the local government election were clear. The public quickly reported, however, the information around reporting and the unclear investigation process after that was not apparent to communities, probably because this was a relatively newly emphasised aspect of elections. The bulk of reporting on disinformation during the election was mainly carried by civil society organisations who created specialised platforms where communities could report.

4. Government and learning

Learning about disinformation becomes essential to create reliable and safe platforms for communities to report disinformation during the election period and beyond. The government needs to be involved in supporting the work of the media and civil society.

As an information-sharing society, we need platforms that are easily accessible for disinformation to be shared, and cases investigated. Actual actions toward combating disinformation also need to be made public. It is vital to continue making the public aware of disinformation as we may have just survived the election. We still have governments assisted by PR companies on public addresses

skilfully using disinformation whilst speaking to communities. We need rural to urban communities to be educated about disinformation, verifying facts and reporting disinformation. Disinformation can destabilise an entire country, as we saw in the July 2021 looting in two central provinces in South Africa.

To guard against that, the government needs to engage in the same exercise of raising awareness/consciousness about disinformation as they do around raising awareness of elections.

Reporting disinformation needs to become a norm. It needs to be broken down into local languages and there needs to be a clear recognition of its criminality. The government has a 'fake news' hotline and email reporting platform, which need to be more publicised and made available. Mainstream education around disinformation is critical and would mean the government plays its part alongside civil society organisations.

7.3 WITNESS.org

Technology platforms

Technology platforms must recognise their role in protecting democracies. Social media platforms are increasingly being relied on for elections among other information needs. Attention must therefore be paid to ensuring that people can access reliable information to make informed choices.

Technology platforms should ramp up efforts to monitor misinformation and disinformation, particularly in-platform election-related mis/disinformation. This should go alongside a corresponding language and personnel support to understand the context and nuance of the communication.

Adequate investment should be made towards labelling accounts of political parties and candidates to make affiliations evident to users. If political adverts must be allowed on platforms, they should be thoroughly vetted before being approved to avoid the spread of harmful or untrue rhetoric. Political adverts on platforms should also be correctly labelled to foster transparency.

Content takedowns of political disinformation should be applied consistently, including false or misleading information by political candidates or parties. Correspondingly, the truth should be intentionally elevated amidst information clutter online. Technological platforms' response to Covid-19 mis/disinformation shows the benefit of promoting accurate information in-platforms and

helping users find and recognise them. This effort should be replicated for election-related disinformation and other forms of disinformation.

Platforms must begin to invest in 'truth infrastructures' to ensure that users have the agency to identify the truth for themselves. This can be done by prioritising in-app verification tools. Media literacy efforts are the bare minimum for the technology platforms. They have a responsibility to educate and sensitise users on the responsible use of the media.

The attention of tech platforms should begin to pivot to ad decentralised servers to enable communities to continue to communicate digitally, debunk harmful disinformation narratives, and elevate the truth despite internet shutdowns that are increasingly becoming synonymous with election cycles, particularly in Africa. This was not the situation in South Africa, but we are beginning to see a growing trend in other parts of the region.

Technology platforms should consult with and listen to communities as well as civil society groups during election cycles to provide solutions that are bespoke and effective in tackling mis/disinformation online.

Behavioural change

Individuals should recognise that they play a role in spreading misinformation and disinformation. Mis/disinformation can have harmful consequences. Therefore, everyone should take personal responsibility to always verify before sharing any information online. If they cannot establish whether it is true or not, they should not share.

People should be vanguards of the truth on social media by sharing fact-based information in response to any form of mis/disinformation they spot. This would benefit the community of users who are also searching for the truth.

Video can be a powerful tool for establishing the truth and countering mis/disinformation. Individuals are encouraged to safely and ethically use video to share credible evidence that clarifies situations and debunks falsehoods.

Every member of society should familiarise themselves with the media literacy efforts of different groups. This would equip them with the right skill sets for spotting and combating mis/disinformation.

Gendered mis/disinformation

We would have liked to dedicate more resources to analysing and generating data around the levels of gendered disinformation in South Africa. The lack of capacity, resources and organisations dedicated to tackling online violence against women and resources made this challenging.

Research conducted by Lucina Di Meco and Kristina Wilfore of #ShePersisted has found that:
"As a growing body of research shows, women in politics are disproportionately targeted by gendered disinformation campaigns that feature fake stories and threats, as well as humiliating and sexually charged images. These attacks aim to frame female politicians and government officials as inherently untrustworthy, unintelligent, or too emotional or libidinous to hold office or participate in democratic politics. Building on sexist narratives and characterised by malign intent and coordination, gendered disinformation both distorts the public understanding of female politicians' track records and discourages women from seeking political careers."

Gendered disinformation is often also targeted at women journalists and opinion-makers.
In a country with one of the highest rates of gender-based violence globally, it follows that it would be the same in the online space. While no South Africa specific data is available, a study conducted by Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) found that, while alarming across the globe, women in countries with long-standing or institutionalised gender inequality tend to experience online violence at higher rates. It also found alarming levels of online violence against women:

- 92% of women reported that online violence harms their sense of wellbeing
- Nearly 9 in 10 women restrict their online activity, limiting their access to employment, education, healthcare, and community
- 1 in 3 women think twice before posting any content online
- Nearly three-quarters of women surveyed expressed concern about online abuse escalating to offline threats
- Half of the women surveyed said the internet is not a safe place to share thoughts. Forced self-censorship means under-represented women's voices, reducing diversity in societal, political, and economic discussions and decisions.

#ShePersisted had published a number of recommendations to tackle online violence against women and gendered disinformation that should be considered for South Africa too. Some of these are:

- Ensuring diversity in the newsroom. The first step towards promoting greater gender equality in the media coverage is ensuring diversity in the newsroom because when more

female journalists are in decision-making roles, women politicians are more likely to receive coverage that is fair in tone and quantity.

- Providing gender-sensitive media training to journalists. Media outlets should commit to providing training to their staff at all levels in recognising and addressing gender bias in their concepts, language, choice of panellists, interview setting and visual materials.
- Adopting gender-sensitive indicators for media coverage of male and female politicians can help improve fairness in the coverage of female politicians and political candidates. Quantitatively, coverage of female politicians and women should aim at being at least proportional to their relative presence in governance, as this would go a long way in normalising the idea of female leadership and empower young women to consider a political career for themselves.
- Challenging gender stereotypes around women and power. Traditional media has the responsibility to start challenging gender stereotypes by showing more gender non-stereotypical images and stories, ensuring time and space are dedicated to disseminating the findings of available research on the benefits of gender equality and shining a spotlight on a more diverse set of leadership styles.
- It is of utmost importance that social media companies address online sexism, gender-based hate speech, harassment, organised trolling and bots aimed at silencing women's and minority voice.
- To ensure that more people, particularly women, can take advantage of social media's equalising potential to engage civically and politically, large companies like Google, Twitter and Facebook should invest resources to level the digital playing field by supporting civil society organisations that train female political activists and women in public office, particularly the ones from traditionally underrepresented groups, on how to use emails and social media in a way that's safe and effective, without being silenced by mobs of hateful trolls.
- Political parties must adopt codes of conduct regarding the use of language on social and traditional media and severely punish sexist and harassing language.

Fundamentally, in South Africa, as is the case across the globe, online violence against women and gendered disinformation requires far greater attention from government, civil society, political parties, the media, academia and society in general. It is of utmost importance that in this digital age, online violence against women, including gendered disinformation, should be seen as part and parcel of any efforts to fight gender-based violence.

7.4 DR DAVID ROSENSTEIN

The following are key steps to potentially consider in attempts to counter disinformation more effectively:

- Reading critically is essential in detecting disinformation and misinformation. It becomes necessary to read the information presented by media, political bodies, or other sources of societal, political, or healthcare information with care and to be deliberate.

- Inattention more often leads to the sharing of disinformation and misinformation. Countering this includes strategies such as the careful deliberation of what an individual has read and not forwarding social media posts where there is ambivalence and uncertainty about the information being read.

- Media literacy as part of the school curriculum may assist in reducing the effects of disinformation. This may form part of the curriculum, for example, incorporating media literacy as part of the life orientation subject.

- Be thoughtful and critical of media and news. Many of us may read a piece of fiction to relax, for excitement, escape, or out of interest. However, when reading news or media, consider your intentions. Think first about why and what you intend to learn before reading further. Engage critically, caution yourself on believing what is being presented to you.

- Social media platforms can take active steps to inform readers about their reading content. This serves to prime and prepare readers to be more thoughtful and considered when consuming media content. In addition, social media sites can post information and warnings which indicate to their readers the trends and strategies that disinformation posts use. These may be derived from detected strategies found within the specific social media platform and general strategies worth considering.

CHAPTER 8

LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSION

LESSONS LEARNED AND CONCLUSION

In the lead up to the 2021 election, Covid-19 lockdowns meant that access to the platforms usually used by political parties in South Africa for campaigning was limited, and depending on the lockdown level - altogether prohibited. Unable to host rallies, public meetings, and in-person campaigning, political parties had to pivot and 'go digital' to win votes.

Political parties undoubtedly recognised that more South Africans were online than ever before. In 2021, internet use in the country had increased by 1.7 million to 38 million out of an estimated 57 million, as noted in the Worldwide Wide Worx's South African Social Media Landscape 2021 Report. This was in line with global trends that saw an increase in online traffic during Covid-19 lockdowns.

Thus, for 2021 election campaign purposes, social media became a powerful and necessary tool for political parties to reach voters. The consequence was that political mis/disinformation would be a far greater threat to public discourse than ever before.

During campaigning, Facebook was primarily used for official communication by political parties. The space was dominated by parties' official accounts posting curated content, which generated the most likes.

The subset of parties monitored on Facebook posted roughly 2,400 messages to their official pages in the month leading up to voting day on 1 November 2021. The EFF Facebook page was the most prolific, followed by the ANC page. Like the ANC's focus on 'building better communities', the DA only pushed one message: 'the DA gets things done'. They used the example of the DA-run City of Cape Town as an example of what a compelling DA-run city would look like. They also engaged in a fair amount of opposition politics, attacking the ANC for corruption and using the load-shedding issue to emphasise failure. The EFF's messaging was heavily focused on land and jobs, with a strong on-the-ground, community aspect. ActionSA's Facebook messaging was more formal than its Twitter messages. Emphasis was placed on ActionSA's on-the-ground community engagements around the issue of service delivery under the slogan of 'Let's fix South Africa'. Also prominent was the party's spat with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) over the party's name not being present on ballots due to an administrative error by the party.

In its ability for any Twitter user to start a topic of conversation, unlike Facebook, the various political parties' messaging and strategies were driven not only by official party accounts but also the personal accounts of various political leaders, their supporters, and untraceable anonymous influencers.

Twitter, therefore, was the prime theatre for political contestation through populism, xenophobia, racial polarisation, Covid-19 skepticism, anti-vaccination, and other harmful mis/disinformation tropes.

For analysing populist and dis- and minformation-driven campaigning, three sub-groupings of South African Twitter deserve particular attention.

- A community of radical populists made of black consciousness voices emphasising the struggle against 'white monopoly capital,' using this phrase as a disinformation strategy initially run by Bell Pottinger back in 2017, which had the effect of polarising white and black South Africans. This community was the audience the EFF and RET audience appealed to.
- A community galvanised around the #PutSouthAfricansFirst hashtag and movement and its über-nationalism and xenophobia - disdain for primarily African foreign nationals. Influencers used this hashtag to demonise foreign nationals for crime, unemployment, homelessness and other disinformation. Political parties such as ATM and ActionSA used the same hashtag to campaign for votes under the guise of calling for the integrity of South Africa's borders and jobs. Their nationalist calls continued to form a crucial part of these parties' messaging, even as they benefited from the negative sentiment generated towards foreigners by the more strident anonymous accounts.
- A community of minority ideologies and groups predominantly made up of South Africa's white body politic polarised from the rest of South African Twitter influenced by overlapping harmful iterations of Libertarianism and Conservatism. Conspiracy theorists, Covid-19 denialists, anti-institution, anti-vaxxers reside within this community with imported overt MAGA-style Trumpian Alt-Right. The DA, Cape Party, ACDP appealed to this community.

An analysis of tweets generated in the lead up to the election showed that one in four tweets were generated by the EFF community, underscoring the extent to which that party dominated the platform. However, it also highlights the disconnect between Twitter and the 'real world'. The EFF was only the third-largest party with roughly 10% votes.

ActionSA, a party that did not exist at the last elections, managed to generate more engagement on Twitter than its leader, Herman Mashaba's, previous political home, the DA. ActionSA's ascendancy on Twitter was undoubtedly influenced by its populist rhetoric and dabbling in xenophobia and other misinformation tropes, which worked to raise the party's profile.

Given that journalists and opinion makers gather on Twitter, campaign messaging percolated into South Africa's general discourse via broadcast, print, and online media coverage. The general shift from traditional news gathering methods over the last few years to the aggregation of social media posts further contributed to this.

A trend emerged in media coverage: presence on social media did not always influence the outcomes of the vote but appeared to have a bearing on winning the battle for media attention.

Using the CivicSignal MediaCloud natural language processing platform, Code for Africa analysed media coverage of the elections by 534 South African media organisations from 1 September to 10 November 2021. While the biggest party - ANC - received significantly more coverage than other parties, ActionSA, a party that is only one year old, was the media's fourth most mentioned. The party commanded 12.6% of the total mentions of the top four.

Contrast this to the official election results, and the disproportionate share of voice held by ActionSA is even more stark. The ANC received 47.9 % of the vote and 47.4% media coverage. The DA is 20% of the vote, 23.2% of media coverage, and the EFF is 10.6% of the vote and 16.4% of media coverage. ActionSA's 1.8% vote is minuscule compared to 12.6% media coverage. It outstripped other smaller parties.

Overall, the project was a great test case for mis/disinformation monitoring and combating during an election beyond just fact-checking. While we have provided a picture of conversations online, detecting mis/disinformation quickly and fighting it with the same speed was impossible. With the limited resources available, and with the civil society bodies that were part of this project self-funding or volunteering – we could not do as much as we would have liked. A great variety of tools available at a high cost would have made our work easier.

We would have liked to see the IEC at the forefront of tackling disinformation with regular report backs to the public. This helps ensure that the elections are free and fair. While it must be commended

for its efforts thus far, much more work is needed. As a start, it needs to make the process the public uses to report content that violates its Code of Conduct to the Electoral Court easier. The process is laborious, and with only a phone number of the Electoral Court provided on the IEC website, this may have deterred many.

While the IEC could quite likely answer that it partnered with MMA, which provided its Real411 as a channel to report mis/disinformation to the public, its impact cannot be measured. It was unclear how long investigations took, where fact-checked and debunked information was shared, and what sanctions were applied. Moreover, this process was not sound in law. Only the Electoral Court has the power to determine whether information shared by political parties constitutes a violation of the IEC Code of Conduct, and only the Electoral Court can impose sanctions.

It was further hoped that the government would have led the charge by calling upon voters to refrain from disseminating dangerous and polarising acts of misinformation in the run-up to the elections. The government could have acted more vigorously from the campaign season to stem the tide of disinformation in circulation in this crucial electoral contest.

It behoves the government to act more robustly to avoid repeating the dangerous misinformation campaign witnessed during the local government elections. It is hoped that the report's release will provide a catalyst for further discussion and engagement between crucial government officials charged with the Communications portfolio in Parliament. It is further hoped that Parliament will also initiate interaction with the authors of this report to take the lessons learnt from this exercise to develop more robust anti-disinformation policies and legislation that could potentially guard against future acts of disinformation perpetrated across the board.

Furthermore, the outcome of its partnerships with social media platforms has not been shared, and the existence thereof was only announced two weeks before the election.

Far more rigorous oversight of platforms is needed. With no data available, it is not easy to gauge their performance. Their relationship with the IEC in this space with a lack of transparency creates a perception that the platforms hid behind the IEC, barely lifting a finger.

This report's critical finding was the general ill-preparedness of social media platforms to address mis/disinformation.

The social media platforms have also not released the results of their work during the election cycle. Accessing these reports is pivotal to studying the individual lessons learnt from this critically important endeavour. This will allow further follow-up collaboration between this project and the social media platforms to conduct ground-breaking research on the topic. This will necessitate additional seminars and potential roadshows to engage with the population on disinformation and their potential role as stakeholders in combating this scourge.

Disinformation has high costs. It leads to misleading and inaccurate beliefs, which can exacerbate partisan disagreement over even basic facts, thus leading to the polarisation of societies. In South Africa, a country marked by a history and a legacy of racial, economic and class division, disinformation-driven attempts to divide and conquer during election cycles are particularly damaging to the country's already tense social and political fabric. Differences in geographical origin, race, class, sexual orientation, and indeed related to falsehoods around Covid-19 have seen violence and deaths. Besides damaging the public discourse and damaging the country's social fabric, this is the alarming impact of disinformation in South Africa.

Disinformation in all its forms is a contemporary crisis of our times. It has the potential to destabilise democracies and political systems. It has many social and psychological impacts, including marginalising groups and individuals and mental health deterioration. Even though people can detect false information, there is still a high risk of susceptibility to disinformation and its deleterious effects because it changes biased perceptions and beliefs.

During the report, it became clear that various social media platforms did little to nothing to combat misinformation. For example, the strategies used by both Facebook and Twitter in the US were not implemented. It shows just how little consideration these social media giants have for their users on the African continent.

It is hoped that the recommendations will provide the fuel for further conversations on this critically important question. The project also hopes this will provide the catalyst for social media platforms to proactively engage with the government in combating disinformation in future elections, most significantly the forthcoming 2024 National Government Election season that is upon the country. Indeed, South Africans of all walks of life have been provided with a massive wake-up call as to the power and potency of social media and the need to engage more responsibly in using these mediums to communicate political views. This report has provided thought-provoking insights.

It is hoped there will be decisive policy interventions from the national government to combat the scourge of disinformation in the future. The failure to act more decisively against mis/disinformation immediately will likely hold detrimental consequences for South Africa. The need to engage in more robust research to further examine this scourge has been brought to light by the current report. However, words such as these will only succeed if followed up with concrete actions. The time for closer consultation between government and citizens on the issue of disinformation has been laid bare by the interactions witnessed on several social platforms during the 2021 local government elections.

This report is a small start to much-needed work in this critically important policy space.