ISS INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

Under the influence?

Online mis/disinformation in South Africa's May 2024 election

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Online mis/disinformation campaigns have the potential to skew the information landscape and undermine key pillars of democracy especially during the election season. These information operations have become a tool of influence across Africa – at times undermining traditional professional media. With a focus on South Africa's 2024 election, this study spotlights the tactics, narratives and actors who drive such campaigns and offers lessons for other African countries.

Key findings

- Researchers observed heightened attempts to undermine the elections with strategies targeting both electoral institutions and the voting process.
- South Africa displayed an active and complex market for online influence. Some actors were driven by ideological conviction; others by commercial rewards.
- Many influencers were paid to amplify key narratives.
- Early seeding of disinformation was observed long before voting day in a bid to prepare the electorate for a challenge in the event of an unfavourable outcome.
- Narratives claimed the electoral system and Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) were corrupt, with some amplified by 'credible' politicians.
- IEC technical glitches were framed as malicious attempts to sway the election and gained significant traction.
- Video or audio taken out of context was used to support vote-rigging allegations, with frequent cross-posting across platforms.
- Real-world strategies were used to give prominence to online narratives, such as the uMkhonto weSizwe party filing a court case alleging the election was rigged.
- Coordinated adversarial exchanges, or 'rage bait', were used to build engagement, with international influencers amplifying issues like Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine.
- Use of generative AI or deepfakes was limited, as was evidence of foreign country influence operations, but more focused research is urgently needed.
- Some influencers had been approached by external actors during their career, indicating that greater foreign operations may be present in future.
- Fact checking organisations and the traditional media played a significant role in de-bunking misinformation and disinformation.

Recommendations

- The South African government and IEC should train their communicators and representatives to counter disinformation.
- The South African government should develop command and control structures to quickly counter disinformation. It should also support global efforts to hold social media owners accountable for the content they publish.
- South African policymakers and the private sector must ramp up digital literacy training for citizens. Ghana and Kenya offer best practice examples.
- African policymakers should advocate for global equity in data standards to monitor mis/disinformation campaigns, as the lack of regulation makes the continent vulnerable.
- African policymakers and researchers should disseminate the tools and techniques observed in South Africa to other election bodies on the continent.
- Researchers should examine a possible growing trend towards regional collaboration between influencers.
- Donors should support digital literacy training for journalists and research on foreign information manipulation and interference across Africa.

Introduction

This study examines the digital information ecosystem in South Africa during the 2024 election campaigning season leading up to polling day on May 29 and the immediate aftermath. It seeks to understand the key actors involved in influence campaigns and mis/disinformation. It sheds light on the primary influence communities and demonstrates how they interact and amplify messages using various techniques to maximise reach. Additionally, it seeks to understand the motivations and modus operandi of key influence actors.

The objective is to provide policymakers, decision-makers and the broader public with a greater understanding of the Tools, Techniques and Processes used within the online information ecosystem to shape narratives or distort reality for a political objective and to create confusion or sow discord.

South Africa's May 2024 elections marked an important milestone in the country's democratic journey

While influence operations appear to be highly context-specific, the lessons learnt from the South African elections are useful for achieving a broader understanding of how online influence operations work. This is important for thinking about how to build resilience to counter attempts to undermine democratic norms.

The election of May 2024 signalled an important milestone in South Africa's democratic journey. The governing African National Congress (ANC), the dominant party since the birth of democracy in 1994, lost its national majority for the first time. This prompted the creation of a government of national unity consisting of 10 political parties that collectively received about 71% of the vote.[1]

The electoral landscape was marked by the arrival of a number of new political parties, most notably the uMkhonto weSizwe party (MKP) which, despite its infancy (having been formed just six months before the election[2]), was able to command a significant following. It received 15% of the national vote, making it the third largest political party, and 45% in the province of KwaZulu-Natal.

In this study, researchers used data and network analysis to provide a macro picture of the online information environment during the election. They identified the main influence communities (groups which interact online around a shared interest) and narratives and obtained insights about how they create and amplify narratives through real and inauthentic means. Periodically, such influence communities' harness international events to support domestic political positions, using examples such as the Israel-Palestine conflict or the Russia-Ukraine war to build shared networks or echo chambers.

The first part of the study provides a detailed analysis of the main influence networks and communities. The second part examines the actors, their motives and behaviour and the key narratives associated with them in greater detail. It assesses the impact on democratic institutions, focusing on the electoral authorities, the justice system and traditional media, which increasingly find themselves in competition with social media influencers and platforms. The concluding section examines the impact and response by traditional media to the rapidly evolving information landscape and offers policy options and practical recommendations.

Methodology

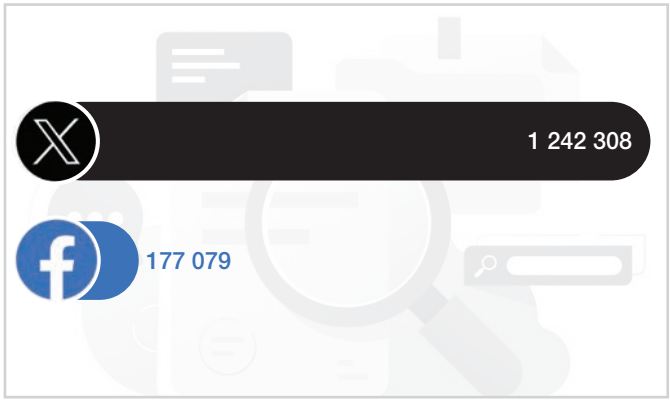
This study uses a mixed methodological approach to identify the primary influence communities and key influencers associated with South Africa's 2024 election. The two primary platforms examined for this study were Facebook and X (formally Twitter) with further contextual analysis provided by a manual search of platforms including TikTok and Instagram. A third-party service provider was used to obtain the data relied upon for this study.

X is a popular platform in South Africa. It is often equated to a town square where varied opinions are shared and has about four and a half million users in the country. However, platforms like TikTok are quickly overtaking X and Instagram in popularity among young people, according to Meltwater's[3] social media market analysis. WhatsApp, which represents the lion's share of South Africa's social media users according to Meltwater, is difficult to access for research due to its encryption.

The study comprised:

- Data analysis using a team of technical consultants to conduct a network analysis of the key influence communities dominating the information ecosystem during the election. The data was captured using a wide range of search terms, keywords and queries related to the South African election as well as key international topics reported on by traditional news media during the election season.
- Open-source research techniques were used to identify some of the key influence actors. The research sought to understand their behaviour, networks and narratives.
- Field interviews were conducted with key influence actors to understand their motivations and modus operandi.
- Interviews were also conducted with academia, civil society and senior editorial staff from traditional media to assess the robustness of traditional newsrooms in the face of attempts to undermine their role as key pillars of democratic accountability.

Chart 1: Documents sampled for network analysis



Research limitations and constraints

Open-source investigations conducted on social media platforms are inherently reliant upon the integrity and accessibility of the platform being investigated. The findings of an open-source investigation hinge on the platform ensuring its data remains accessible, replicable and verifiable. At the same time, platforms are constantly evolving their service offering, features and user experience, which can (and does) impact on the methodological approach used to conduct an online analysis.

- A major constraint was obtaining the relevant data. The platforms that form part of this study do not offer affordable options to access their data for the purposes of academic research. X suspended its free application programming interface access on 9 February 2023. Access is now limited to a prohibitively expensive option or third-party data brokers.
- The ISS bought a social listening licence from a third-party provider to do this research. Larger data aggregation companies and market/branding platforms now sell their services at premium rates, which significantly raises the cost of research.
- Conducting field interviews is an inherent part of this methodology. Speaking with users who form part of the information ecosystem and are actively influencing it can provide insights the raw data only hints at. However, there were challenges in securing interviews with these users, who either did not respond to requests, refused to conduct the interviews in person or insisted on anonymity.
- To this end, the names of individual users who are not prominent politicians or public persona have been redacted. A public persona is defined for the purposes of this study as a political representative, a high-profile relative or associate of a political representative, an established political analyst or well-known media, entertainment or sporting personality. Where there is doubt as to the status of the individual user, caution has been exercised and the user has not been named. The aim of this study is to understand the factors that drive influence campaigns. It is not intended as a name-and-shame exercise or exposé.

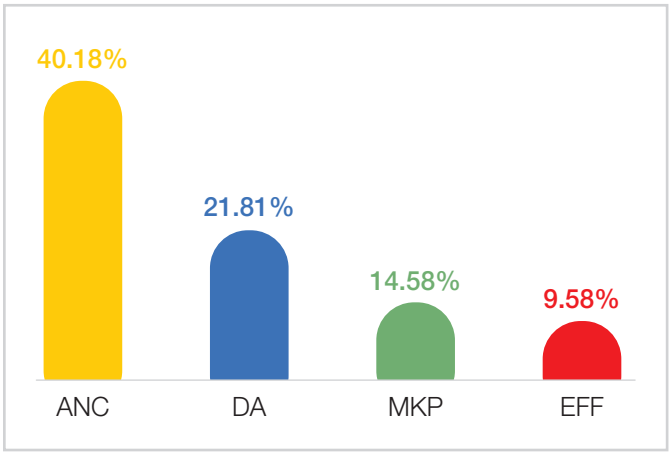
The information ecosystem and influence

Main communities in 2024 election

The South African election of 29 May was the seventh since the democratic dispensation of April 1994. The country's 27 million registered voters were invited to elect members of a new national assembly as well as the provincial assembly of nine provinces. For the governing ANC, whose support has been on a slow decline in successive national and local government elections, the contest was especially significant.

Among the key challengers was the MKP, formed six months before polling day and comprising several senior former ANC figures, including former president Jacob Zuma. Other notable challengers included the continued presence of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and the establishment of a multi-party charter[4] by key opposition parties including the Democratic Alliance (DA). A smaller number of opposition parties opted to remain outside the alliance.

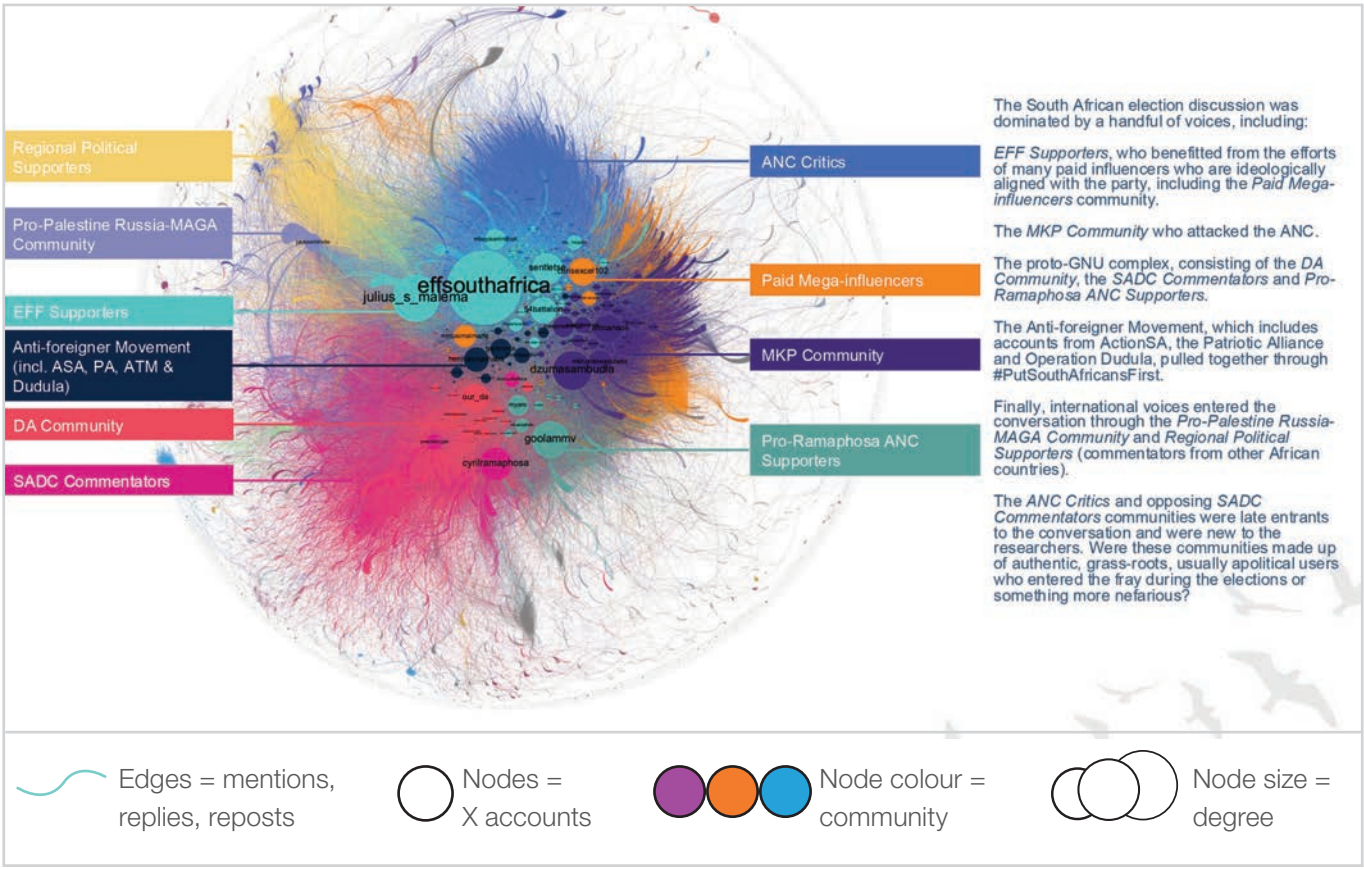
Chart 2: South African election results for 2024



Source: Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)

Computational analysis (data analytics) highlighted MKP and EFF as being the 'loudest' voices on X and Facebook. Both had an outsized effect on the conversation given their final election results. Both appear to have benefitted from paid influencers including those ideologically aligned to the party.

Chart 3: Interaction network and the dominant voices on X



Source: ISS/Murmur Intelligence

Using a sample of more than 1.2 million documents on X from 15 May 2024 – 29 June 2024,the above diagram offers a macro perspective of the main interaction communities who were the 'loudest' voices on social media platforms during the election. The diagram is based on volumes of activity with communities clustered together as they coalesce around particular issues/narratives. The size of each node denotes the total number of posts each account contributed to the overall network.

Note: The paid influencer community is anchored by the website MDN News (@mdnnews), which is the largest mega-influencer platform in the country. They are so large and impactful that they form their own community, distinct from the numerous nano and micro influencers who populate the South African political landscape, particularly within the EFF and MKP communities.

The table below shows the ranking of the most prominent influence communities within the interaction network.

Key findings from interaction network

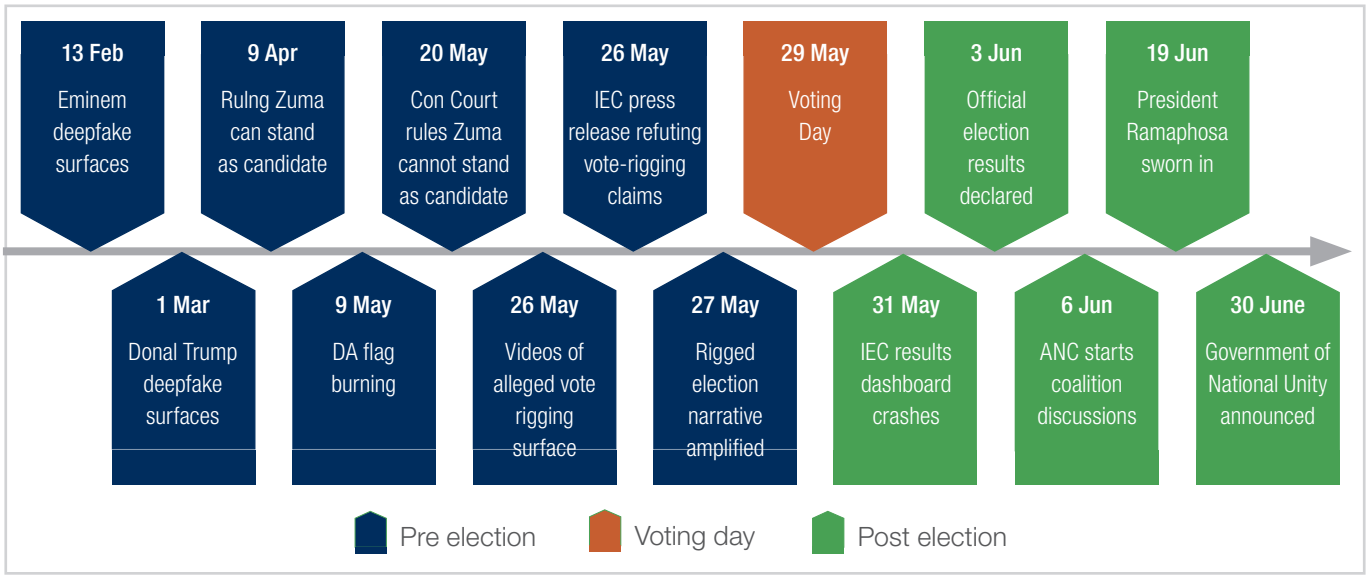
- Both the EFF and MK parties were the most prominent voices on social media, with each benefitting from the activities of supporters of their ideology and campaigns as well as paid influencers.
- Many of the MKP's online narratives were defined by its attempts to undermine the integrity of the election results by pushing the conspiracy theory that the results were stolen.
- ActionSA, the Patriotic Alliance and the African Transformation Movement parties all grouped together within the anti-foreigner community together with Operation Dudula. Operation Dudula started as a grassroots vigilante-type group with an online presence and later registered as a political party. However, it was disqualified[5] by the Electoral Court from contesting the 2024 election for technical reasons. Leveraging anti-foreigner rhetoric in this election does not appear to have paid off for these parties.
- A novel community of ANC critics joined the discussion a few days before the election and just as suddenly exited the conversation. On initial inspection, this community appears to represent organic engagement, but researchers were unable to identify who was involved and why.

The MKP Community generated almost 1-in-4 posts (25%) in the total sample of users followed by the EFF supporter's community, which generated 1-in-5 posts (20%). This high level of content generation is indicative of either particularly passionate community members or inauthentic amplification.

Chart 4: Prominence of communities based on volume of posts

Ranking	Community	Posts	%
1	EFF supporters	26 713	10.07%
2	ANC critics	25 185	9.49%
3	MKP community	22 423	8.45%
4	DA community	22 139	8.34%
5	SADC commentators	16 108	6.07%
6	Pro-Ramaphosa ANC supporters	15 661	5.90%
7	Anti-foreigner movement	15 228	5.74%
8	Paid mega-influencers	14 744	5.56%
9	Regional political supporters	13 112	4.94%
10	Pro-Palestine Russia-MAGA community	10 726	4.04%

Chart 5: Timeline of key events during the 2024 election season



Source: ISS

Engagements and gaming the algorithm

Social media platforms now play a vital role in shaping the information environment during election periods. Not only are social media platforms, websites and dedicated applications used by electoral bodies and political parties to keep voters informed, they are also a breeding ground for false information and manipulated narratives.

Users of social media platforms are exposed to and interact with content seen on their own personalised, algorithmically selected timelines and feeds. Each user's digital worldview is curated through an algorithmic process designed to maximise a user's time spent on the platform by capturing their attention for as long as possible. Platforms, in turn, sell this attention to advertisers, generating revenue and value for their shareholders.

Each platform has subtle differences in the way it retains a user's attention, and each platform uses algorithmically selected content tailored to a user's unique preferences. Each user's engagements – from liking or reposting an image to the time spent watching or reading someone's post – influences the algorithm's decision of what content to show next on your feed.

X

X centres its user engagement around likes, reposts (formerly retweets) and replies, creating a fast-paced information environment where content can spread quickly. The platform's algorithm weighs these interactions, particularly reposts and replies, heavily when deciding what content to boost and show in users' timelines.

X's environment is more text-centric and conversation-driven, which has historically made the platform useful for identifying and tracking disinformation narratives. Its structure fosters echo chambers, showing users content from similar viewpoints, which reinforces beliefs and amplifies false narratives through repetition and engagement.

X's algorithm prioritises real-time interaction, pushing trending topics or heavily engaged posts to the top of users' feeds. These can include popular or controversial political narratives that generate a lot of interactions. Coordinated groups of users can game or exploit this algorithmic bias to introduce narratives or hashtags into the timelines of users who would not normally see their posts. Coordinating numerous

posts or retweeting and replying with the same hashtag can trick the algorithm into treating it as a trending topic.

Facebook

Facebook engages its users through a combination of interactions including likes, shares, comments and reactions (e.g. love, angry, sad). The platform's algorithm emphasises content that receives high levels of interaction, especially comments and shares, which indicate that a post is generating discussion. The emphasis on engagement leads its algorithm to prioritise posts that spark debate or controversy, which are rife during an election cycle as contested as South Africa's 2024 election.

Facebook's algorithm also considers the user's relationships, ranking content from friends and groups that the user frequently interacts with higher, which creates tight-knit communities that can reinforce specific narratives. This runs the risk of creating or reinforcing information silos where users are exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, making it difficult for fact-checked or corrective information to penetrate these networks.

TikTok

TikTok features a dynamic and visually driven interaction system relying on short-form video content. Users can like, comment, share and repost videos, but the platform's most influential feature is the 'For You' page, which is algorithmically curated based on user behaviour.

The algorithm prioritises engagement signals like watch time, video replays, likes, shares and comments to determine the content shown. TikTok's recommendation engine is designed to keep users on the platform for longer periods by surfacing content that aligns with their interests and emotional responses. As a result, content that is highly engaging or provocative, including political narratives, has the potential to go viral quickly, amplifying its reach regardless of its accuracy.

Unlike other platforms, TikTok's algorithm is more aggressive in pushing content from non-followed accounts, making it easier for new or manipulated information to gain traction and reach large audiences rapidly.

Key narratives

During an election cycle, dominant themes, stories or talking points emerge that can shape public opinion, influence voter behaviour or distort perceptions of specific issues, political parties or institutions. These narratives are essential in framing political discourse and can be leveraged to achieve various strategic goals from promoting legitimate political messaging to orchestrating disinformation campaigns targeting the electoral process.

Understanding these narratives allows analysts to trace the flow of information during an election cycle, weigh up the impact of social media narratives on voters and identify which groups are most susceptible to their influence. Recognising how these narratives are constructed and amplified – both organically and through coordinated efforts – provides a crucial foundation for identifying potential manipulation and foreign interference.

During South Africa's 2024 national election, researchers identified several key narratives around electoral issues. They are grouped according to the thematic brackets discussed next.

Targeting the IEC's credibility

This narrative intended to weaken public confidence in the IEC, an institution constitutionally mandated to ensure the integrity of the electoral process. Critical institutions, such as the IEC, are often the target of influence operations that aim to create doubt about their independence or competence, thereby eroding public trust in the institution as a key pillar of democracy.

Any attempt to undermine public trust also paves the way for social fragmentation as audiences take up positions in defence or in critique of the organisation being targeted. This fragmentation and the attempts to cast doubt on the IEC's ability to run free and fair

elections can contribute to the overall delegitimisation of the electoral process.

To what extent this was achieved beyond the support base of key parties such as MKP is debatable. It is important to note that in the South African context, legal attempts by the MKP party to declare the election rigged through the Electoral Court – amplified on social media platforms – were withdrawn by the party in July 2024.[6] This is discussed in the lawfare section of this report.

This is not to say that the IEC is beyond scrutiny. Where legitimate complaints about the electoral process are raised or where claims of fraud or illegal voting practices are identified, investigations must take place. Social media platforms provide an avenue to reveal concerns and ways of addressing them to the broader public. The severity of such allegations and their potential impact require the evidence accompanying such claims to be sufficient; the evidence they rely on needs to be equally open to scrutiny. Key examples of this narrative are outlined below.

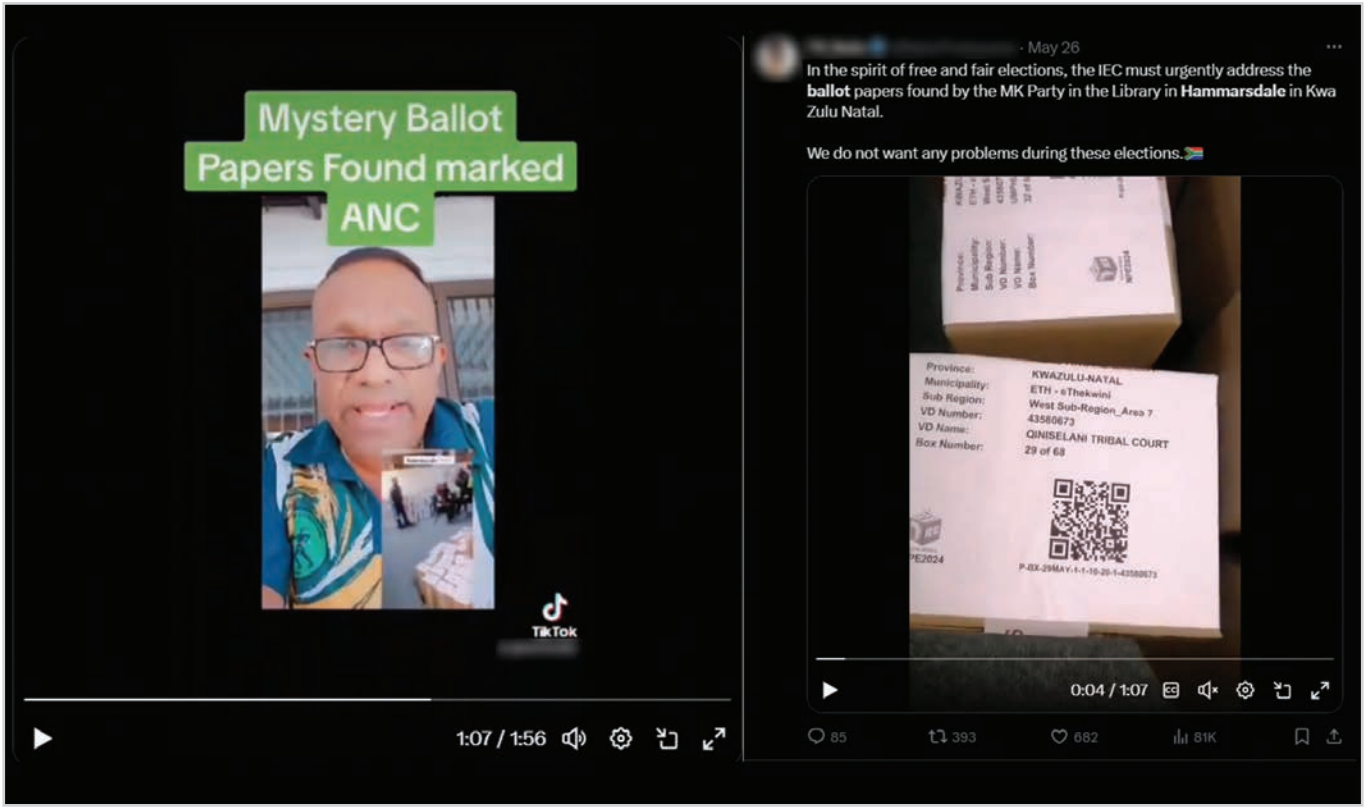
Allegations of vote rigging

On 25 May 2024, a day before early special votes were due to be cast across South Africa, videos circulated on TikTok and WhatsApp showing IEC boxes at a venue in KwaZulu-Natal.[7] The accompanying narrative, propagated by MKP members and leaders, accused the IEC of vote rigging, alleging that the boxes contained improperly stored ballot papers. Senior MKP leaders also spread the allegations.[8]

As the IEC later clarified,[9] the boxes formed part of the IEC's logistical operations for early votes and did not contain any ballots. Instead, they consisted of 'bulk materials' – the cardboard booths, signage and other material used to set up a voting station. MKP members later tried to enter the warehouse where the ballots were stored.

Vote-rigging allegations were a recurring narrative during the election. Decontextualised videos of old or even foreign elections were circulated as 'proof' that the election was manipulated, a claim the MKP persisted with even after Parliament was properly sworn in.

Chart 6: Example of post on X of re-posted TikTok video suggesting marked ballot papers found and appeals to IEC to investigate



Claims that the IEC is a political party

Several allegations from the EFF[10] and MKP leaders accused the IEC of acting like a political party and participating in the elections instead of being an independent body meant to oversee them. They also accused the IEC of acting in a biased manner that favoured certain political entities, particularly the ruling ANC. These claims were based on incidents like the one in KwaZulu-Natal, where opposition parties felt the IEC's actions lacked transparency.

Harassment of IEC Commissioners

While the IEC as an institution faced accusations of partiality and corruption during the election, IEC Commissioner Janet Love was specifically targeted by MKP supporters as being biased and corrupt. The origin of these allegations appears rooted in her comments made as vice-chair of the IEC, during which she dismissed Zuma's claims of bias.[11]

The MKP later issued a press statement calling on Love to resign,[12] based on her comments on Zuma's eligibility to be included in the party's candidate list. The press release referred to allegations that Love legitimised the May 2023 election in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,[13] which was disputed by civil society organisations in the country.

Even after the South African election results were announced, MKP leaders insisted Love be arrested.[14] Even broader criticisms directed at the IEC's overall handling of election logistics and transparency were directed at Love.[15]

Claims that IEC officials were arrested/implicated

Several claims[16] on social media suggested that IEC officials participated in vote-rigging activities and were subsequently arrested,[17] but the IEC denied these claims during its election briefings. Two people were arrested for improperly handling voting material prior to the election but, according to the IEC, they were representatives of a political party.

Claims made by Zuma on the eve of the results announcement suggested[18] there were arrests for vote rigging, although the IEC chairperson indicated there were no such reports. The narrative gained significant traction when one of the IEC commissioners, Nomsa Masuku, was arrested after the elections on fraud allegations[19] pre-dating her appointment to the IEC.

Targeting political parties and their leadership

The delegitimisation of political parties by associating them with unfounded claims of corruption, incompetence or dishonesty in the lead-up to the election aims to diminish a party's credibility and appeal to voters. For instance, accusing a political party of colluding with criminal figures, electoral officials or foreign governments creates an image of dysfunctional and compromised parties, which fosters public disillusionment with the political system.

'Dumb Alliance' campaign

Another campaign, discussed in more detail below, targeted the DA with allegations of voter fraud, election rigging and racism.

Targeting the electoral process

Some narratives targeted the electoral processes themselves, aiming to discredit the system and generate distrust among voters about the ultimate results. These campaigns exploit the vulnerabilities in electoral administration to foster doubt and reduce voter engagement.

Voter suppression and confusion

Voter suppression entails the systematic exclusion of certain segments of voters from voting. Voter segments delineated in terms of race, socio-economic standing, location or age groups can be targeted. For example, false claims of long queues in certain voting districts can disproportionately disenfranchise voters who are young, while voting stations in remote areas can disenfranchise those without the means to get there. This leaves affected voters feeling disenfranchised and sceptical of the voting system's fairness and outcome.

Section 24A votes

Section 24A votes – special votes for those voting outside their registered districts – caused significant confusion. For this, regional ballot voters had to apply in advance of election day to vote in another district than where they were registered. In some cases, due to the administrative complexity, voters were unable to cast their ballots. Not only did this contribute to a feeling of disenfranchisement, it also caused confusion during the

collation and counting of the votes and the display of these votes on the IEC's results dashboard.

Calls for a re-election

Widespread calls for a re-election are usually based on allegations of systemic failures in the electoral system so significant that a recount is not an option. This narrative signals to the public that the outcome of the election cannot be trusted and the systemic flaws are so significant a new election is the only remedy. This undermines the acceptance of the results, incites opposition and potentially leads to post-election protests or legal challenges.

Targeting the outcome of the election

Narratives targeting the outcome of the election aim to discredit the legitimacy of the results by exploiting technical issues, amplifying suspicions around vote calculations and leveraging unfounded statements by public figures on the legitimacy of the results. The goal is to sow doubt and discontent among voters, particularly those whose candidates performed worse than expected.

Allegations of vote rigging

Allegations of vote rigging against both the ANC and the DA undermine the legitimacy of the election outcome. The implication is that parties in power (the ANC nationally and the DA in the Western Cape) had control or influence over the results and could affect these in their favour. The election itself is positioned as compromised, unrepresentative of the will of voters and, as a result, illegitimate.

In addition, accusations levelled against multiple political parties create the impression that all parties are corrupt and no party is credible.

Amplifying technical failures

Technical issues, such as the IEC's results portal downtime on 31 May 2024, can be reframed to suggest either incompetence or intentional manipulation. This narrative targets the reliability and transparency of the election results.

Exploiting complexity in vote calculations

Calculating the number of seats in national and provincial legislatures is a complex, difficult-to-understand process that is open to misinterpretation and deception. In an election as tightly contested as this year's, even a single seat can mean the difference between a governing party and its opposition. By taking advantage of the complexities of these calculations, these narratives fuel suspicions that the outcome was manipulated, encouraging people to view the results as contrived or fabricated.

Claims of foreign interference

Foreign interference narratives use a well-established influence operation tactic: portraying external actors as threats to national sovereignty and democratic integrity. This type of narrative is designed to sow distrust in both

DURING AN ELECTION CYCLE, NARRATIVES CAN EMERGE THAT SHAPE PUBLIC OPINION, INFLUENCE VOTER BEHAVIOUR OR DISTORT PERCEPTIONS

domestic political actors and foreign entities, creating an environment of suspicion, fear and division.

The efficacy of foreign influence narratives lies in their ability to tap into fears of a loss of national sovereignty and the belief that external actors are pulling the strings in deciding who leads the country. Although this study did not explicitly set out to examine the role of foreign influence, it remains an important consideration.

The Africa Center for Strategic Studies reported 25 disinformation campaigns across sub-Saharan Africa in 2024,[20] six involving Kremlin-linked actors. Additional studies, including one by the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change and Murmur Intelligence, linked the MKP to Russia,[21] identifying three vectors of Russian influence in South Africa. Indeed, scholarship examining the extent of influence by key nation states has increased and may account for why more cases are being reported.

In this broader study of disinformation during the South African election, the ISS and Murmur Intelligence sought to identify the range of online foreign mentions on X throughout the campaigning season. The range of foreign country mention was diverse but made up about 4% of the total volume sampled. The countries selected represented those that were most prominent in traditional media reporting during the course of the election.

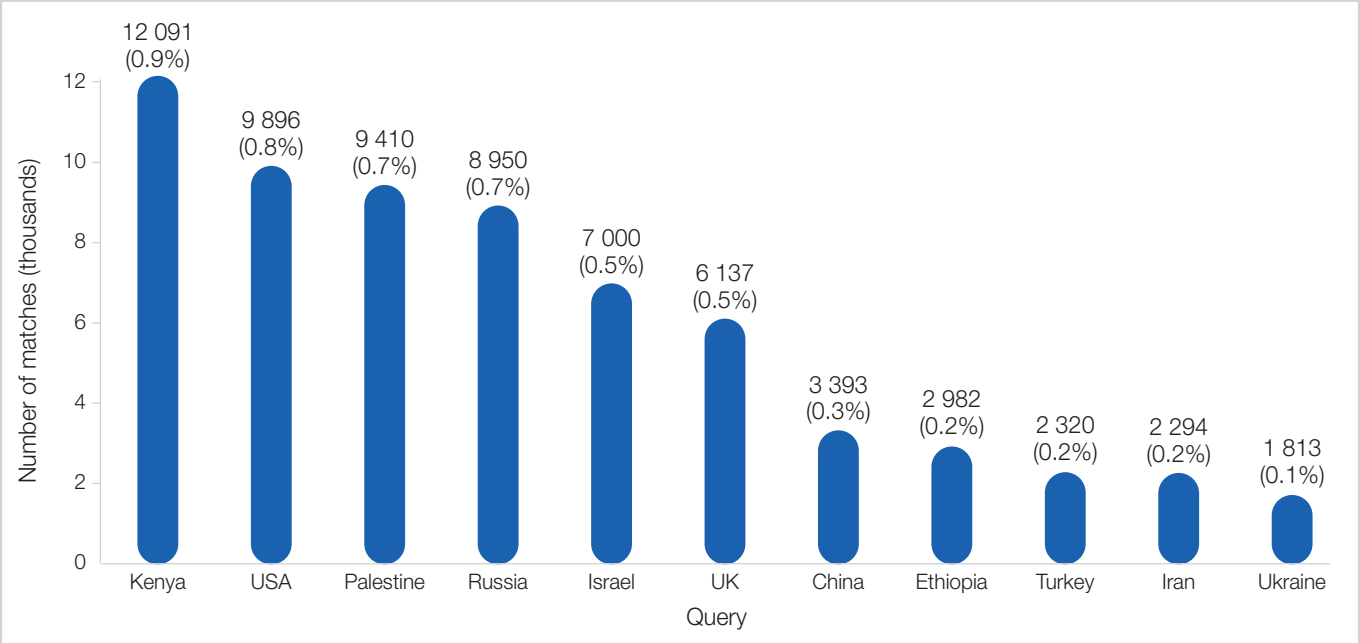
Most notable is that discussions about Kenya were the most prominent. This is largely due to the protests in Kenya that coincided with the South African election. These protests were amplified by traditional news outlets, EFF leader Julius Malema, Kenyan influencers with their South African networks and product influencers capitalising on high engagement. Additionally, 'ordinary' social media users were drawn to the events due to the uprising, which forced the Kenyan president to do a rare U-turn on a proposed piece of unpopular legislation.[22]

The efficacy of foreign influence narratives lies in their ability to tap into fears of a loss of national sovereignty

Mentions of the US were linked to that country's election in November 2024, with some posts suggesting the DA was in cahoots with the US employing the politics of racial division to win voters. Other posts suggested parallels between Zuma and US President-elect Donald Trump's use of 'fake news,' claiming Zuma was 'playing a Donald Trump' by spreading falsehoods 'to his social base so that he emerges as a victim.'

Mentions of Palestine and Russia were consistent with South Africa's geopolitical position regarding both

Chart 7: Foreign country mentions on X during May 2024 election season



Source : ISS

countries. It is interesting to note that Ukraine mentions were extremely few compared to Russia, despite pro-Ukraine lobbyists and strategic communications firms working hard to build awareness in South Africa about the war in Ukraine. This included offering journalists press trips (a common practice globally) and the opportunity to interview President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv.[23]

The disparity in mentions also potentially reinforces the argument that Russia's use of information operations as a strategic tool[24] is more advanced than that of many other nations. However, as many South Africans hold pro-Russia views, this arguably makes the need for Russian online strategic influence campaigns here less urgent, although there is growing interest in investigating the nature of Russian narrative control in Africa.[25] It is important to emphasise that the focus of this study was on disinformation and the broader information ecosystem and did not specifically single out nation state actors.

The low volume of foreign mentions highlights the dominance of domestic narratives during SA's election period

This study also focused specifically on the use of social media platforms as a tool of influence. China as South Africa largest trading partner[26] might be expected to command more influence (and mentions) on social media platforms, especially given both countries' membership of the BRICS alliance. However, China has traditionally sought to wield strategic influence through its Belt and Road Initiative[27] and the acquisition of media assets.[28] In South Africa, 20% of Independent Media, (ranked the second most popular news website by number of views) is Chinese owned.[29]

References to Turkey/Türkiye and Iran in the sample of foreign country mentions are almost certainly associated with events in those countries during the course of our sampling. Iran's deepening involvement in the war between Israel and Hamas would appear to account for the mentions in our sample.

The low volume of foreign mentions overall underscores the dominance of domestic narratives during South Africa's election period. However, it is worth noting that influence campaigns often harness local grievances to metaphorically stir the pot and so can be hard to trace and attribute. The 'white monopoly capital' campaign by the UK-based PR firm Bell Pottinger exemplifies this tactic.[30] More recently research has suggested that Russia uses local 'buzzer' or amplification accounts to re-post material at scale, 'injecting Russia's perspective into domestic discussions about global conflicts'.[31]

From an influence operations standpoint, several key concepts are essential to understanding how this narrative functions. These are outlined next.

Erosion of trust in political actors through alleged foreign ties

A persistent false claim was that the DA had strong ties with Western governments, particularly the US, with allegations of the DA acting as a proxy for foreign influence in South Africa. Similarly, accusations against the MKP suggested it had received campaign finance from Russia, possibly through connections between Zuma and Russian President Vladimir Putin. While DA leader John Steenhuisen made these claims against the MKP, he admitted there was no direct proof. MKP leaders denied the allegations and accused the West of manipulating the election to favour other parties.

Framing foreign-funded CSOs as instruments of interference

Domestic civil society organisations (CSOs), such as media monitoring, advocacy and civil rights groups, also faced accusations of foreign influence. Claims that these organisations were compromised because they are funded by Western or pro-Western actors to interfere in South African politics were observed during the election. These narratives aimed to delegitimise the independent efforts of such organisations in monitoring the elections and promoting human rights.

Promoting regional destabilisation and secessionism

A major narrative revolved around alleged instability in KwaZulu-Natal possibly egged on by Western intelligence agencies. The claims, originating from manipulated screenshots of a fringe publication started shortly before the election, were unfounded. Amid allegations of vote rigging in the province, the close outcome of the election and the July 2021 unrest, the narrative suggested foreign forces were using domestic issues to undermine a free and fair election.

Prior to the election, a separate set of false reports suggested that the Cape Exit movement was funded by the CIA, which was working in conjunction with the DA to establish an independent Western Cape. Additional claims were made suggesting the movement was rounding up and arresting people of colour. These narratives aimed to stir regional tensions by ascribing fictitious conduct to these organisations.

Fostering public distrust in democracy

Claims that foreign actors influenced the election results were central to efforts to delegitimise the 2024 outcome. The MKP, for example, declared the election 'rigged' and suggested that Western governments had played a role in manipulating the process in favour of the ANC-DA coalition. Despite these accusations, international election observers, including those from the African Union, concluded that the elections were free and fair, with no evidence of foreign meddling.

Xenophobia

Xenophobic sentiment in South Africa has a long history with Human Rights Watch spotlighting an alarming rise in attacks against foreign nationals in South Africa in 2008.[32] These have persisted and have been characterised by a culture of digital vigilantism.[33] The ISS has reported extensively on the rise of Operation Dudula,[34] an online movement that morphed into a political organisation that has driven an anti-foreigner agenda. Operation Dudula did not stand in the election due to registration[35] issues.

Against the backdrop of widespread economic insecurity, a lack of service delivery, high unemployment, claims that foreign nationals are taking jobs or engaging in criminal activity provide a simple answer to a complex question. The pre-existing social and economic frustrations amplify narratives that portray immigrants, particularly from other African nations, as threats to the livelihoods of South African citizens.

While key hashtags centred around Action SA and its leader, Herman Mashaba, focused on the topic of immigration, the emphasis appeared to be on electioneering rather than pushing overtly xenophobic content. It may also signal a growing awareness among political parties that the authorities are now actively monitoring xenophobia and hate speech.[36]

Amplification and engagement techniques

Elections, particularly closely contested ones, are inherently polarising times of heightened emotional and political stakes. Before, during and after the election, voters are vulnerable to narratives that target their support for specific parties, policy positions or even the electoral process itself. The electoral violence in Kenya in 2007/2008 is a widely reported example of this.[37]

Various groups, such as foreign state actors, commercially driven influencers and politicians themselves, exploit this vulnerability, promoting various narratives in the hope that they will influence behaviour or the sentiment of audiences receptive to their messaging. On social media platforms, narratives are ranked according to their popularity, so privileging or demoting certain narratives are part of the modus operandi of influence campaigners.

Organic or inorganic engagement

The amplification of narratives can be achieved through both organic and inorganic engagement strategies, which differ in their intention and authenticity. Organic engagements can reflect true public sentiments, foster real conversations between voters and help to shape informed opinions on political parties, representatives or the voting process. By contrast, inorganic engagements are tactical manipulations intended to influence these things in an undemocratic, non-transparent way.

That inorganic engagements are often dressed to appear as organic underscores the detrimental role they play by making it harder for voters to discern credible sources or make well-informed decisions.

Organic engagement

Organic engagement involves interactions on social media platforms that occur naturally, without external influence or financial incentives. Users liking, sharing and commenting on a platform based on genuine interest or relevance to them would fall within organic engagements.

In an election cycle, this is most often seen among party-political movements, community discussion groups or political party rallies where supporters discuss their support or opposition for a party based on their sincere beliefs. Even political party members themselves can campaign during an election, drumming up support

in particular wards or targeting opposition parties for their mistakes.

The key principle underscoring organic engagement is its authenticity, regardless of the merits of the underlying narrative. Right or wrong, these are real users supporting real causes sincerely.

Inorganic engagement

Inorganic engagement relates to paid or manipulated strategies used to artificially boost the reach and/or engagement of narratives and content on social media platforms. The use of paid influencers (especially if undisclosed), bots or sock puppet accounts to amplify likes, replies or mentions falls within this scope.

During an election, such techniques can alter public perception by implying increased support or opposition of political parties, policy offerings or candidates, even when the opposite might be true.

Truthful information can also be artificially amplified using inauthentic means as part of a political agenda.

Overt political advertising

Some political parties leveraged the use of digital advertising on online platforms during the 2024 election. To this end, both Meta (which owns Facebook and Instagram) and Google (which owns Google Ads, Search and YouTube) provide transparency portals for political ads on their platforms.

Parties can use these platforms in the same way they would traditional political advertising on radio or TV slots, ads in newspapers or public billboards to vilify their opponents, court voter support or increase the visibility of their policies. These ads are transparent in the sense that is clear which political party is paying for them, allowing voters to assess the narrative in that light.

During the election, the DA, Rise Mzansi and Freedom Front Plus (FF+) stood out in terms of their spending on political advertising on Meta and Google platforms compared to other parties. According to Media Monitoring Africa's Political Advert Repository, estimated advertising spend for notable parties for May and June 2024 can be broken down as illustrated in the table below.

Elections are inherently polarising times of heightened emotional and political stakes

Notably absent from the digital advertising list are the EFF and MKP parties, which may suggest their prioritisation of campaign spend lay elsewhere.

Use of party-political influencers

Political leaders and other influential public figures can use their status as 'trusted messengers' to amplify false or misleading narratives. By leveraging their authority and credibility, they can lend credence to unverified claims about election integrity, political party behaviour or policy impacts.

Even when debunked, these statements tend to circulate among supporters of a party, creating a

Chart 8: Total spend by political parties

Party	Total digital ad spend in May and June 2024
DA	R 7 087 183
Rise Mzansi	R 3 508 750
FF+	R 1 172 476
ANC	R 192 273
Referendum Party	R 181 030
ActionSA	R 135 000

Note: figures are based on spending estimates reported by Meta and Google's advertising application programming interfaces and, while not precise, provide useful comparative information.

Source: Political Advert Repository, https://www.padre.org.za/social-ad-graphs

persistent echo chamber effect that erodes trust in the electoral process.

Public statements by political leaders claiming the elections were rigged lend credibility to earlier allegations of electoral manipulation. This amplifies the perception of irregularity in the election process but presented by trusted messengers from within the electoral system.

Use of paid product influencers

Paid influencers played a key role in distributing narratives during the election. These individuals, often with large followings on social media platforms, are usually compensated to promote products, services or events for brands interested in engaging the large audiences they command.

Come election time, these same influencers can play a role in distributing political narratives that promote specific parties, cast doubt on political opponents or take aim at the election process itself.

Influencer-style engagements try to appear organic, deceiving the average user into thinking the narratives are organic. This tactic blurs the line between authentic opinion and strategic communication, since rarely do influencers on social media platforms disclose who funded their campaigns.

In addition, the stratified nature of influencer networks in South Africa, multiple vernacular languages and off-platform coordination around these campaigns make them hard to detect. Using nano, micro, macro and mega influencers can make narratives appear organic, and clever gaming of platforms' trending algorithms can reach audiences even outside their vast networks.

Lawfare

Lawfare leverages the authority of the legal system to lend credibility to claims of a compromised election. When claims of election rigging or procedural failure are raised in court, they appear validated, giving the impression that such accusations hold weight. Regardless of the eventual outcome of the court case, the fact that legal proceedings were instituted allows actors to suggest that these issues are legitimate concerns 'in front of the courts.'

Both the Electoral and Constitutional courts were the focus of these legal battles. One of the most high-profile challenges came from the MKP on 16 June, when it filed a case with the Electoral Court, alleging that the elections had been rigged and demanding a court-sanctioned re-run. MKP claimed that '9.3 million' votes were 'missing' – a claim dismissed as 'patently false' by the IEC's chief electoral officer, Sy Mamabolo.

Two weeks later, the party quietly withdrew their case, but arguably, the damage to the IEC's reputation had been done. The legal challenge sought to keep MKP in the international headlines as its party MPs boycotted the swearing-in ceremony in Parliament. This move was bolstered by a high-profile social media campaign amplifying the 'rigged election' narrative. A list of key court cases is provided in Notes.

Manipulated media and false information

The use of manipulated images and video to distort reality is also a feature of the disinformation environment online. Although the use of generative AI imagery, known as deepfakes, to create content appears to have been limited, the reasons for this need more research. Where it was used, the purpose was often to create support for a candidate or party.

Most prominent in terms of reach was an AI-generated deepfake of Trump who appears to be supporting Zuma and his MKP. It surfaced more than a month before election day and was amplified by key MKP supporters including Zuma's daughter, Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla. It originally surfaced on TikTok, then was shared extensively on X before Africa Check labelled it 'fake.' It mirrored a similar tactic used in the Nigerian 2023 election.[38]

An AI-generated video of the rap artist, Eminem, which surfaced in March 2024, appeared to endorse the EFF. It was viewed tens of thousands of times across multiple platforms including Instagram, TikTok, X and YouTube according to Africa Check, which also labelled this material 'fake' and released press notices warning of the duplicitous content.[39]

But the original content was sourced to a video of an interview the musician took part in from a British television talk show in 2009. Although frequent social media users familiar with deepfakes may easily recognise such material as inauthentic, it still has the potential to confuse voters and seed expectations of an EFF win.

Chart 9: AI deepfakes of Donald Trump and Eminem used for candidate endorsement

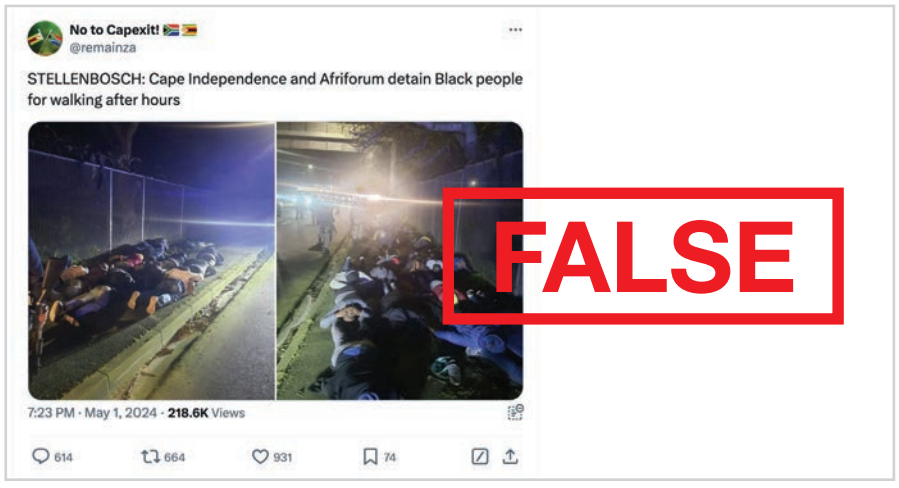
Source: X

De-contextualised images/video

Authentic material used out of context is a popular tactic in disinformation campaigns. It lends authority to a particular narrative and invokes the power of imagery to secure engagement.

Shifting timelines coupled with impactful video or stills were used by several actors to endorse a particular view. For example, the image below, posted by a prominent influencer on 1 May 2024 was accompanied by text claiming that 'Cape Independence and AfriForum detain black people for walking after hours.' The post was viewed by 218 000 unique users. However, analysis of the image from Africa Check shows it was taken in 2023 following the arrest of violent suspects during a taxi strike in the Western Cape.[40]

Chart 10: Example of decontextualised imagery



Source : X, https://x.com/remainza/status/1785570668995563898

AUTHENTIC MATERIAL USED OUT OF CONTEXT IS A POPULAR TACTIC IN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

Regional political influencers

Some of the case studies below explore the interplay between South African and regional political influence, where actors deliberately engage regionally to broaden their networks or amplify narratives. Regional influencers leverage events like the South African election to promote their interests. Our data sample shows a disproportionate number of Kenyan influencers, likely due to the overlap with major protests in Kenya. The amplification was mutual with Malema posting support for the Kenyan protesters. Product influencers also sought to capitalise on the engagement.

Chart 11: Post on X from a Kenya-branded account, amplifying Malema's support for Kenyan protesters

Case studies and interviews

While the data analysis and open-source research techniques helped to provide a picture of the information ecosystem online, ISS sought to obtain 'real world' field interviews to enrich the data and provide context and nuance. However, researchers were dependent on the cooperation of influence actors identified through the data. They approached online account owners on X directly, requesting research interviews.

The research was further challenged by the presence of 'sock puppet' accounts – accounts that mimic grassroots support or impersonate individuals – which cannot be traced to real personas. These accounts are typically managed by 'masked' individuals whose identities remain hidden, making it difficult to identify subjects for interviews.

Where account holders did agree to engage with the ISS, they did so on condition of anonymity. Furthermore, by exploiting existing real world networks and collaborating with a South African journalist proficient in a number of vernacular languages in addition to English, the ISS was able to obtain in-person and online interviews with several key influencers. The aim was to understand the dynamics of the information ecosystem and provide context, not to surveil them as individuals. Therefore, key account names that engage with posts have been redacted.

Case study 1 – overview from an insider

ISS researchers were able to speak to one of South Africa's most prominent influencers on X to gain a bird's eye view of the social media information ecosystem in South Africa.

This individual has been on X for more than 15 years but has faced periods of suspension. He explained how he started to emulate the engagement tactics he observed in the US. He said trolling celebrities was an important way to build engagement, so he joined a number of US-focused groups on Telegram and then-Twitter and began sharing content in a coordinated fashion with other likeminded influencers. He said with 100 people sharing a link 'within 15 minutes, before you know it, the tweet has reached 50 000 people.' Negative engagement often results in higher levels of interaction.

Regional coordination

The influencer described how he engaged with Kenyan Twitter through K2, a group that amplifies 'what Kenyans are saying online.' By courting antagonistic, often nationalist-themed interactions, he sought to provoke reactions, appropriate networks and build his South

African following. This strategy, observed in a previous ISS study on the 2022 Kenyan elections, is now widespread across Africa. As this influencer boasts: 'We are interacting with Kenya, Botswana and Zimbabwe, and now Nigeria, who seem to be online 24/7.'

Influence, politics and multi-media platforms

Case study 1 states that social media has become a vehicle of 'propaganda for politicians' either to elevate a particular candidate or 'conduct a smear campaign against them.' Yet the influencer recognised the value of radio in reaching a broader, older, less digitally savvy audience, noting that campaigns often aim to convey their message across both platforms.

Independent journalism and social media

The influencer believed 'everybody on social media is a journalist,' viewing traditional media as directly competing with social media platforms. He conflated eyewitness accounts of 'news events' with journalism. Although eyewitness accounts can be invaluable as sources, the role of professional journalists is to provide context and balance. 'They don't like it when the news has been brought by someone out there [online]; they will call it misinformation. Traditional media positions itself as "authentic," we must take it that their source is a true source, but to me, what they write can be correct and another 30% is wrong.'

He indicated that a tactic to undermine traditional media reports online is to flood the posts with comments. 'Comments are almost as important as the original story,' he said, adding that 'the publication will either be forced to listen to what the people are saying or retract or delete the post.' This reflects the nature of social media platforms that prioritise the most popular posts.

Political influence and the May 2024 election

Political parties do not generally have their own internal influencers, so they reach out to key online personalities individually. While influencers may work for several political campaigns at once, their 'credibility is at stake,' so they tend to 'scout for influencers who are [politically] aligned.'

Challenging electoral institutions

This influencer appeared to support attempts to undermine the electoral authorities through a series of campaigns that painted the contest as rigged. He believes 'social media has helped to expose the incompetency of officials, so that is the nice thing about these elections. A lot of things that we didn't know that were being done in previous years, now, are coming to light.' He accuses the electoral authorities of using 'disorder and diversion' through 'propaganda and misinformation' about certain leaders. This appears to be a reference to the authorities' attempts to challenge Zuma's right to stand as a parliamentary candidate.[41]

Insights into paid-for campaigns

He said experienced influencers know the best times to tweet – like midday – and if people are tweeting the same thing 10 minutes apart, 'it's easy to say,

REGIONAL INFLUENCERS LEVERAGE EVENTS LIKE SOUTH AFRICA'S ELECTION TO PROMOTE THEIR INTERESTS

"yeah, this one is a campaign." Once it reaches about 1 000 re-posts, it becomes a trend … that's how the algorithm works.'

He described the 'big men' running campaigns for R500 000, but says small influencers often do not receive the money. Some influence agencies now run apps that influencers enrol on, which function like a database. 'That is how they control it,' he said.

Many influencers have corporate or government backgrounds and manage several 'ghost' accounts – accounts that follow active members, but do not use engagement techniques such as liking and commenting. They also have free internet access.

AI and content creation

Regarding AI and content creation, he said: 'It is not yet a big thing in South Africa. People use ChatGPT etc. to write tweets, but in terms of altering video, when we do see it, it's "personal" [as opposed to being commissioned by a client] because a client would have to give prior approval to this type of AI. It needs a certain degree of specialisation. When it comes to social media, there is no education, no formal education. Even the people who are doing the marketing for universities, they come to us.'

External and nation state influence

'There is an agent in the US, last night, they paid me $170 just for a retweet,' the influencer said. He revealed he had worked on campaigns in Malawi, Tunisia and Liberia, noting approaches from other countries typically came through agents or third parties.

On Russian influence, he pointed to the strong ties between some former ANC members and now MKP members, many of whom were trained or educated in Russia. He also claimed Israel was funding the Western Cape independence movement saying: 'So the outside world is influencing South African politics, but it's for the love of money. It's not genuine for our people.'

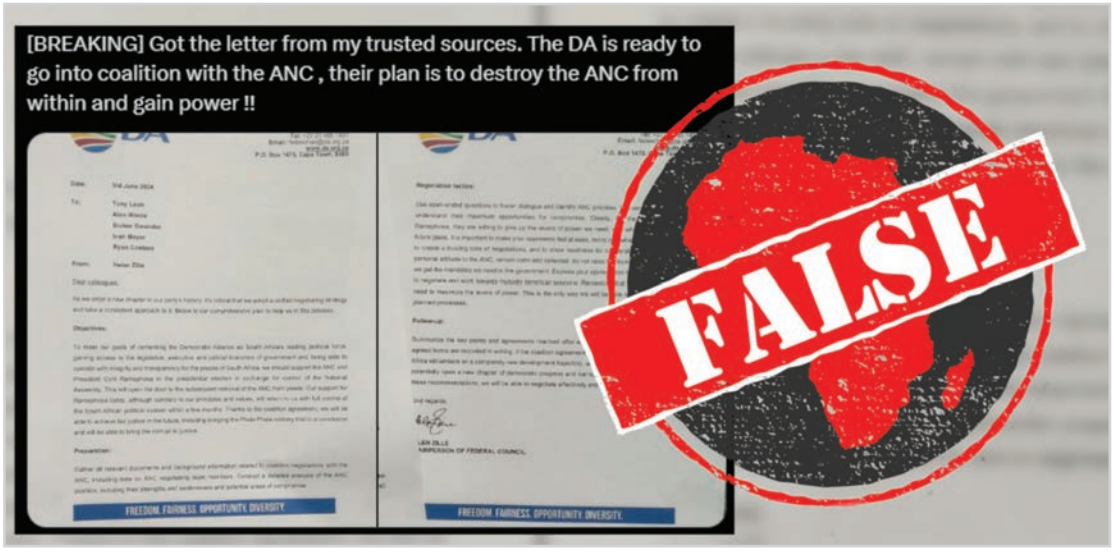
Case study 2: the ideologically aligned product influencer

Case study 2 was identified by ISS data analysis as one of the top 20 influencers during the South African election. He claims to have campaigned for several political parties, most of which are broadly aligned with the political left, but has not disclosed the specific parties he worked for.

His X account was closed in mid-June because of what he believes was his overtly political content. It may also have been the result of this case study producing inauthentic content. During his online engagements, he claimed his 'sources' had provided him with a 'leaked letter,' which was widely condemned by other social media users as 'fake.'

Released in early June, as talks were underway between a number of political parties to establish a government of national unity, the 'fake' letter stated that the DA was

Chart 12: 'Fake' letter marked as false by Africa Check



Source: See notes[42]

ready to form a coalition with the ANC, but their plan was 'to destroy the ANC from within and gain power.' Many online users condemned this as a fabricated document designed by the influencer for the sole purpose of farming engagement. Africa Check published an advisory labelling the content 'fake.' The case study produced no further comment on this document during the interview.

Political influence and product influencing combined

Case study 2 displays a deep understanding of the online information environment and claims his motivation is to 'make money and make an impact on South African society.' Classified as a product/political influencer, he pivots between promoting merchandise and celebrities and amplifying political narratives. After briefly writing for the controversial Independent Online, accused of distorted journalism[43] and pro-Russia propaganda, he turned to online influencing to inspire students to 'decolonise their minds and bring about change.'

Strategic intent to cultivate broad audiences

Focusing on 'politics' and 'gossip,' this influencer demonstrates a strategic intent to cultivate broad audiences enabling him to create and amplify content that appeals to a diverse online audience and provide continuity and 'security of engagement'. 'If I tweet about politics tomorrow, there are 5 000 people that are going to read. If I tweet about church tomorrow, there are 3 000 people who are going to read,' he said. Prior to his accounts being suspended, this approach enabled this influencer to maintain a stable and sizable presence online.

Creating narratives and crafting hashtags

Throughout the election, narratives focusing on alleged vote rigging by the IEC were amplified by parties such as the MKP and EFF, who had seeded the idea before voting day that the election would not be fair. Case study 2 capitalised on the resulting doubt about the IEC's capabilities and neutrality. He claims to have created #boycottIEC, which undermined the integrity of the electoral authorities and coincided with the MKP's legal case against the IEC.

Some of the responses #boycottIEC elicited included calls to action: 'We will never allow @IECSouthAfrica to get away with electoral fraud because it will never stop. We are ready to engage the enemy if the Electoral Court violates our democratic rights.'

Others called for due process to be followed: 'Dear South Africans, let us be responsible enough and not spread disinformation on social media. The ANC, EFF, COPE, AM4C, GOOD, ACC, Land Party, UDM, MKP, FF+ and other parties have followed proper processes and have lodged an urgent objection with the IEC.'

#boycottIEC was identified on 1 May, nearly a month before the election, with users suggesting the dice had been loaded and '@iecSouthArica and Janet Love & USA is gna rig this elections to facilitate a Ramaphosa ANC & DA coalition no matter how we vote.'

While no evidence emerged to support the claim of vote rigging and the MKP withdrew its legal case against the IEC, the reach of this hashtag and its broad engagement served to help undermine a key pillar of South African democracy.

Claims of Russian influence

Crucially, this influencer told ISS researchers that Russia had paid him to amplify narratives aimed at 'destabilising' South Africa. His brief was to highlight the 'brutalities that the blue party was doing to black people.' The blue party is a reference to the DA. When probed about the mechanics of his engagement with a Russian client, Case study 2 claimed he was approached by the client via the direct messaging service on X.

A number of other influencers were apparently approached in a similar manner. His brief, he claimed, was to amplify pre-existing content supplied by the client, including text and 'fake video.' Each time he liked a post, his client paid him R40 to R50. He did not disclose specific details of which video he was commissioned to amplify, but during the election, there were many examples of inauthentic video content being circulated on social media platforms.

Payment for such services, he said, tended to be made through platforms such as PayPal or directly into an influencer's South African bank account.

When asked about the motivation of the Russian client, he speculated: 'They're looking for a change regarding the blue party in South Africa … the blue party is heavily affiliated to the US. The US is something that funds the Ukraine war … and Russia is an ally to South Africa. So, they are trying to be like saving a friend, according to my perspective.'

This may reflect the proliferation of Russian flags associated with South African generated social media accounts that appeared during the election. 'It's South Africans being in solidarity with Russia. It is the same people that put the Palestinian flag on their profiles. They're in support with Russia.'

Claims of regional influence

Case study 2 also sheds light on the regional dimension of social media influencing. He told ISS researchers the governing ZANU PF party in Zimbabwe had approached him to run a campaign undermining opposition leader Nelson Chamisa. The proposed campaign, he claimed, would revolve around narratives undermining the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) leader's Christian beliefs. He told the ISS that he rejected this assignment and chose to undertake work for the MDC instead.

Skills acquisition as an influencer

Case study 2 honed his skills during the lockdown that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa from March 2020.

He befriended 'big influencers' including Chris Excel, to break into the world of online influencing and expand his network. He described the collaborative, sometimes parasitic, nature of influencing in South Africa. The 'secret is to monopolise the system,' he said, by harnessing other influencers' networks. By building 'a community of influencers, it amplifies our voices whether they're true or false,' he added. This influencer is now focusing on product influencing on other platforms including Instagram and TikTok.

Case study 3: the 'Dumb Alliance' influencer campaign

While the previous case studies focus on influence actors, Case study 3 takes a deep dive into a coordinated influence campaign involving a network of mostly paid influencer accounts that targeted the DA. Their efforts and amplification coordinated around #DumbAlliance. As part of this campaign, the accounts shared links to a website highlighting negative reporting on several of the DA's party representatives, including Natasha Mazzone, Ian Cameron and Renaldo Gouws.

Coordinated network of influencers using a common hashtag

The network was first identified when a coordinated group of influencers used #DumbAlliance on 9 April 2024. The hashtag was amplified in original posts, in the replies to these posts and by reposts from accounts within the network. There were also a number of inadvertent amplifications from prominent accounts that engaged with the hashtag.

Chart 13: Post on X from the @DumbAlliance campaign account

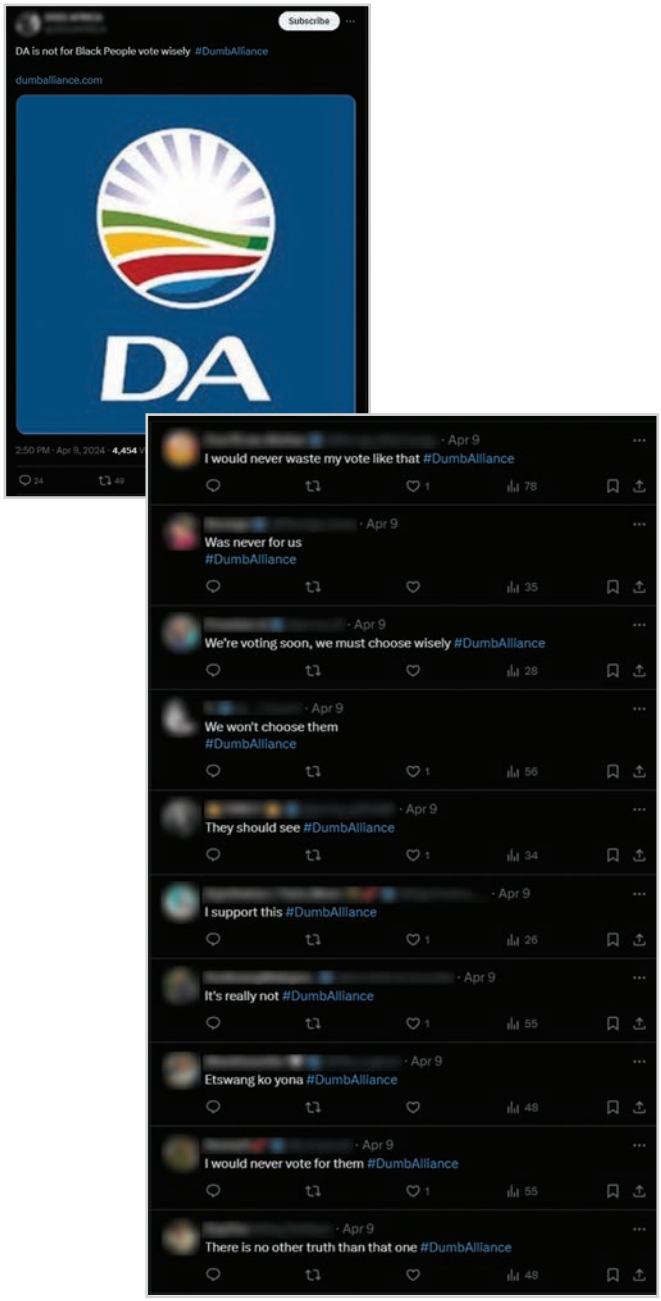


Chart 14: Hashtags associated with the 'Dumb Alliance' campaign

No.	Hashtag	Active dates	Number of mentions (including retweets)
1	dumballiance	9 April 2024 – 12 April 2024	3 922
2	byebyeda	21 May 2024 – 28 May 2024	11 536
3	danotayoba	21 May 2024 – 23 May 2024	6 867
4	notwhiteenough	26 April 2024 – 27 April 2024	3 418
5	rescuedumballiance	26 April 2024 – 27 April 2024	6 040
6	saynotoda	10 March 2024 22 March 2024 25 March 2024	3 121
7	stopdaracism	12 April 2024	4 023
8	dontstealourvotes	28 May 2024 – 29 May 2024	3 566
9	stoptheda	7 June 2024 – 22 June 2024	24 135
10	doomsdayforda	7 June 2024 – 10 June 2024	11 098
11	boycottelections*	5 April 2024	825

* where this hashtag was used in the same tweet as 'DA' or 'Democratic Alliance'

The influencer accounts amplifying this hashtag were used as a pivot to identify additional hashtags. At least 11 of these had a bearing on the DA, and all of them were part of a coordinated negative sentiment campaign by influencer accounts. Unlike traditional political advertising, these accounts did not disclose any financial incentives for amplifying these hashtags.

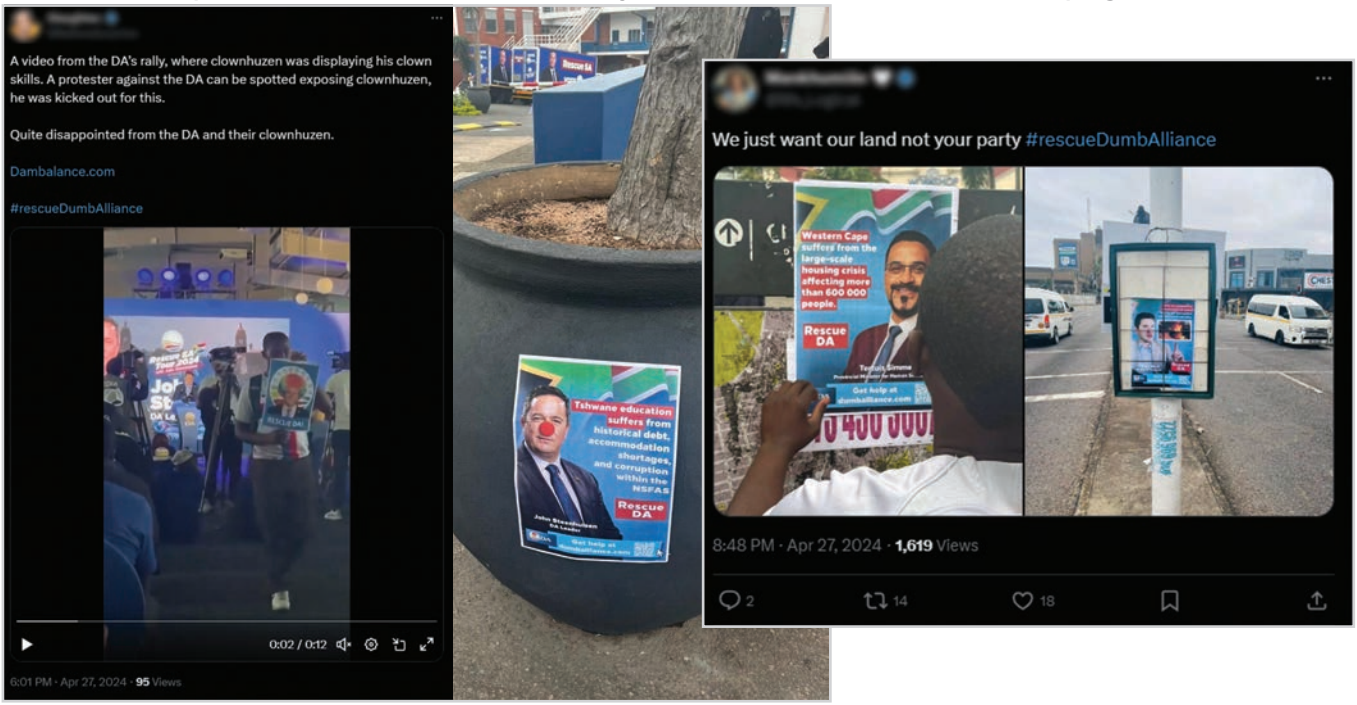
A network map of the users amplifying these hashtags revealed a core group of 24 accounts that promoted at least seven unique hashtags throughout the election period. While these accounts presented themselves as social media marketers or influencers, their engagements with this many hashtags suggests their activity was coordinated.

Real-world activities amplified online

In addition to the coordinated amplification on X, the campaign also extended to real-world activities.

- The network amplified apparent vox pop[44] interviews conducted with allegedly random South Africans. In these interviews, several young black South Africans were questioned about their voting choice. Without exception, they said that although they had previously voted for the DA, they would not do so in the coming election. While these responses are plausible, it does suggest a highly selective approach to interviewing 'ordinary members of the public.'
- Multiple real-world posters were found among the images posted by the accounts online. Posters resembling DA-branded election material, featuring a URL and QR code to the www.dumballiance.com website, were spotted on refuse bins and lampposts in Durban.
- Between 1 March and 30 June 2024, the network generated more than 3 000 posts, replies or reposts. These included URLs to www.dumballiance.com. Although the site's content verged on parody, it hosted a 2-minute-long video of Steenhuisen stuttering during interviews and pictures of him dressed as a clown. It also highlighted multiple negative media reports of prominent DA members.
- The domain was registered using a privacy proxy to conceal the name of the domain owners, and no transparent indications of the site's ownership or funding were disclosed. The video metadata of the Steenhuisen video clip revealed it was generated in a different time zone to South Africa (GMT+3 instead of GMT+2) but revealed no further evidence on the domain owners.

Chart 15: Examples of offline or 'real-world' activity related to the 'Dumb Alliance' campaign



- These accounts primarily shared what appeared to be valid political opinions, though some included allegations of vote rigging by the DA or calls to boycott the polls. The lack of transparency surrounding the network, its paid-for nature masquerading as organic engagement and the uncertainties around the website's origin and its real-world activities create a significant problem. Voters exposed to these narratives would struggle to make informed decisions, as they would be unaware of the true sources of these messages.

A more detailed analysis of this campaign is supplied in Annex 2.

Role of traditional media

Despite widespread reports of a growing erosion of trust in South African media, traditional and legacy outlets have shown relative resilience against mis/disinformation campaigns during the election season. However, the large-scale retrenchment of newsroom staff constrains journalists' ability to report from the field. The traditional media landscape in South Africa is diverse, with both state-owned and private media outlets. While IOL has faced scrutiny over its management, journalistic standards and disputes with the South African press regulator, whom IOL accuses of undue oversight, the South African press as a whole is generally seen as well-organised, professional and constitutionally supported.

South Africa's robust civil society infrastructure, constitutionalism and strong track record in highlighting alleged transgressions by powerful elites may also explain why traditional media still identifies itself as the 'fourth estate' – a defender of democratic institutions and a bulwark against disinformation campaigns.

Unlike ISS research from other settings, such as Kenya during its election of August 2022,[45] traditional media in South Africa did not find itself extensively engaged in adversarial exchanges with key online influencers who use negative exchanges to undermine the media and deepen their own influence networks – so called 'rage bait.' Media houses appeared to be aware of their role as 'useful idiots' or unwitting foot soldiers amplifying false narratives.

A closed-door event hosted by ISS researchers with senior South African editors to discuss the information environment during the election, revealed both opportunities and concerns:

- Significant credit was given to fact-checking organisations such as Africa Check, Media Monitoring Africa and the South African National Editors' Forum

for mobilising resources to help newsrooms ahead of the election in identifying and de-bunking inauthentic online content. Fact-checkers are not routinely present in South African newsrooms.

- A month before the election, South African Government Communication and Information Sysrem (GCIS) set up a network with government computer scientists, fact-checking organisations, Media Monitoring Africa and a number of think tanks – including the ISS – to identify and analyse reports of so called 'fake news.' GCIS also conducted a communications campaign labelling inauthentic content for distribution and conducted counter-disinformation interviews with the national broadcaster, SABC.
- A number of editors who took part in the ISS closed-door event said that what the digital era had done was 'cause us to dilute or fragment content' as they tried to keep up with events being talked about on social media. As a result, newsroom staff often followed what was trending online and 'lost focus' on major news stories.

The SA press is generally seen as well-organised, professional and constitutionally supported

- There was also a keen sense that traditional newsrooms were becoming 'dislocated' from audiences as they were having to compete directly with social media platforms for audience share and advertising revenues.
- There was a concern that WhatsApp conversations and WhatsApp groups in vernacular languages may have been more 'impactful' in spreading false information during the elections than popular platforms such as X and Facebook.
- One editor found a generational gap between 'generally older more experienced editors overseeing newsroom operations', and younger inexperienced interns or journalists tasked with monitoring or producing social media content on behalf of the news organisation. This gap between the editorial and production arms of the newsroom, or between newsgathering and output, was considered a factor that made traditional media 'vulnerable to future disinformation campaigns' and counter-disinformation strategies.

Recommendations

This study highlights the context-specific nature of online influence during the South African election. Many influencers blended ideological support with financial gain, while others were driven by purely commercial aims. This dynamic mirrors the nature of South Africa's political parties, many of which have a clear ideological focus. In contrast, in several other African countries, political parties often maintain a more transactional relationship with voters, which in turn is reflected in the way online influence is leveraged.

Countering disinformation narratives

The IEC struggled to respond swiftly to false narratives about election rigging and alleged flaws in the voting and counting processes. There were missed opportunities to quickly explain the cause of technical glitches creating an information vacuum enabling rumour and mis/disinformation to flourish. While the IEC did eventually offer clarity about such challenges, it was too slow. Therefore, the government should consider the following:

- Holding a joint de-briefing workshop with the IEC and GCIS to understand what could have been done differently enabling better preparation ahead of local government elections in 2026.
- Providing training to key figures within GCIS (many of whom come with professional communications or journalism backgrounds) to improve government responses to disinformation campaigns more broadly. This may be through tabletop exercises and scenarios drawing on outsourced expertise.
- Effective response requires clear command, control structures and speed. Government communicators and stakeholders including the IEC should develop disinformation response plans ahead of time which authorise key individuals to brief media etc. on counter-disinformation responses in a timely manner.

Share lessons for other elections in Africa

While information operations during elections appear to be highly context specific, policymakers and researchers should widely disseminate the tools, techniques and

processes observed during the South African election to other election bodies in countries preparing for elections.

Research regional collaboration

This study has surfaced what may be a growing trend towards regional collaboration between influencers. The main motivation is to share tools, techniques and processes and build their respective engagement networks. This phenomenon needs to be monitored and researched further to understand the impact – and consider mitigation measures – ahead of other African elections.

Global equity in standards

African policymakers should unite to advocate for global equity in data standards to monitor mis/disinformation campaigns across Africa. The lack of regulation makes the continent especially vulnerable to mis/disinformation campaigns. South Africa's competition commission has already embarked upon this to advocate for global access with a prominent inquiry on the use of digital platforms.[46] South African policymakers should use their experience in the recent election to join voices globally to assess the impact of digital platforms on information integrity.

Continental leadership

The South African government should support global efforts to hold social media platform owners more accountable for the content they publish. South Africa has a potential leadership role to play when it assumes the Presidency of the G20 in December 2024, which will enable it to build on the work initiated by other countries, such as Brazil, to counter disinformation campaigns.[47]

Targeted digital literacy training

While fact-checking and de-bunking narratives aimed at de-legitimising electoral authorities and the polling process may have helped mitigate the impact of some disinformation campaigns, a robust professional traditional media has proven to be a significant bulwark against coordinated attempts at spreading mis/disinformation. Nevertheless, donors should consider supporting targeted digital literacy training for practising journalists as new AI-driven disinformation techniques and practices evolve.

Public-private partnerships

Policymakers need to urgently consider working with private sector providers to help ramp up practical digital literacy training for citizens in the same way that cybercrime campaigns have sought to make the public aware of potential online harms. Best practices from across the continent should be emulated with countries such as Ghana and Kenya offering good examples of this.

Researching threats

Donors should consider directing resources to support researchers to monitor African agency in response to the threat posed by Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference campaigns across Africa. Although the focus of this study was not on nation state campaigns, and there was limited evidence of external influence in South Africa's election, more fragile states across Africa are vulnerable to external influence campaigns. A study examining African agency in the context of such campaigns could provide valuable insights to anticipate developments and inform policy.

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Annex 1

Glossary of terms

Astroturfing – The practice of creating fake grassroots movements or organisations to create the appearance of popular support for a particular cause or issue.

Coordinated link sharing – Coordinated link sharing behaviour consists of multiple social media accounts sharing links to off-platform content in a coordinated manner. This is especially prevalent on public Facebook groups and pages, where accounts can reach audiences that are not composed of their usual friendship circles.

Cross posting – Posting the same piece of content across different channels e.g X, Facebook, Tik Tok.

Disinformation – False information which is intended to mislead

Follow trains – This refers to a deceptive follower-boosting technique in which the accounts that participate follow each other in a transactional arrangement to boost their mutual follower numbers.

Hashjacking – Hashjacking is the use of unrelated, but popular or trending, hashtags on a post in order to capitalise on the increased exposure awarded to such a hashtag.

Inauthentic amplification – Inauthentic amplification or inorganic amplification involves using social media to promote a particular message or agenda through likes, re-posts, shares and other forms of engagement techniques or tactics that are deceptive. They're often used to create the popular consensus for a specific topic or down out opposing views. This is often conducted in a coordinated fashion.

Inorganic engagement – Engagement on social media platforms which uses a variety of techniques (including payment and advertising) to ensure a topic appears high up in the social media rankings.

Misinformation – False of inaccurate information

Organic engagement – Engagement on social media platforms which is not paid for i.e it represents engagement between users who may be genuinely interested in a topic.

Trend manipulation – Algorithmic gaming entails the coordinated abuse of a social media platform's algorithms to create the impression that the narrative, post or content is of a trending nature. This most often entails a small, coordinated network of accounts that engage in high volumes during hours when few users are online. This behaviour tricks the algorithm into assigning it a higher priority on user timelines, exposing regular users to the same narratives and driving up traffic

Sock puppet account – Online fictitious accounts used to conceal the identity of the author.

Annex 2

Detailed analysis of the 'Dumb Alliance' influence campaign

Between 1 March and 30 June 2024, a network mostly consisting of likely paid influencer accounts targeted the Democratic Alliance by coordinating their efforts around, and amplifying, the #dumballiance hashtag. As part of this campaign, the accounts shared links to a website highlighting negative reporting on several members of the DA's party representatives, including Natasha Mazzone, Ian Cameraon and Renaldo Gouws.

This case study examines the interaction between online and offline facets of these campaigns, the use of undisclosed, likely paid-for amplification of political narratives by social media influencers and the lack of transparency that accompanies them.

The network was first identified when a coordinated group of influencers used the #dumballiance hashtag on 9 April 2024. The hashtag was amplified in original posts, in the replies to these posts and by reposts from accounts within the networks. There were also a number of inadvertent amplifications from prominent accounts that engaged with the hashtag.

The influencer accounts amplifying this hashtag were used as a pivot to identify additional hashtags they amplified between 1 March 2024 and 30 June 2024. At least 11 of these hashtags had a bearing on the DA, and all of them formed part of a coordinated negative sentiment campaigning by influencer accounts that did not disclose any financial incentives for amplifying these hashtags.

Chart 16: The 'Dumb Alliance' campaign

Chart 17: Hasthtags that formed part of a coordinated campaign against the DA

No.	Hashtag	Active dates	Number of mentions (including retweets)
1	dumballiance	9 April 2024 – 12 April 2024	3 922
2	byebyeda	21 May 2024 – 28 May 2024	11 536
3	danotayoba	21 May 2024 – 23 May 2024	6 867
4	notwhiteenough	26 April 2024 – 27 April 2024	3 418
5	rescuedumballiance	26 April 2024 – 27 April 2024	6 040
6	saynotoda	10 March 2024 22 March 2024 25 March 2024	3 121
7	stopdaracism	12 April 2024	4 023
8	dontstealourvotes	28 May 2024 – 29 May 2024	3 566
9	stoptheda	7 June 2024 – 22 June 2024	24 135
10	doomsdayforda	7 June 2024 – 10 June 2024	11 098
11	boycottelections*	5 April 2024	825

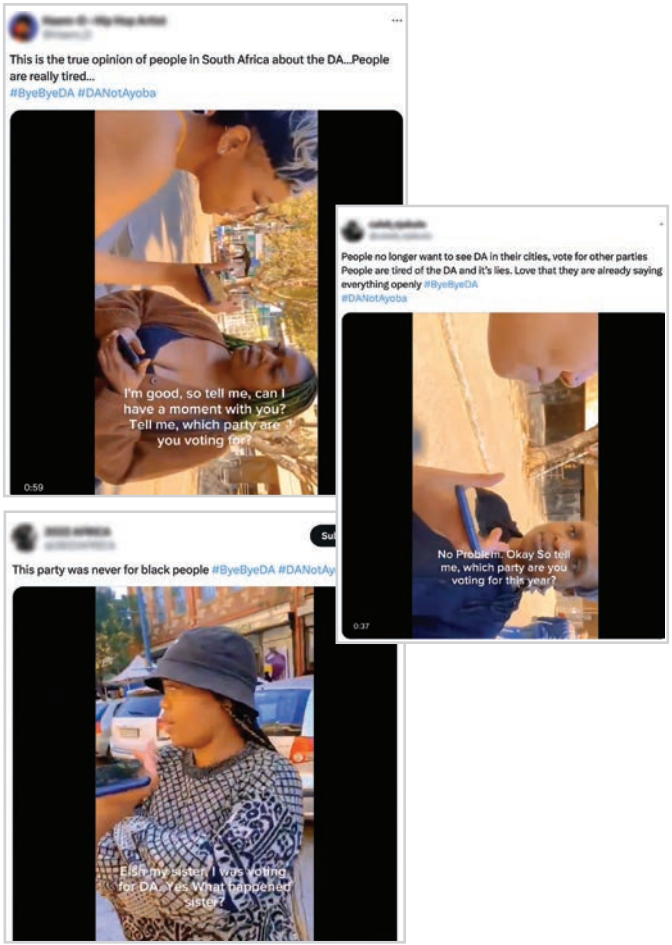
* where this hashtag was used in the same tweet as 'DA' or 'Democratic Alliance'

A network map of the users amplifying these hashtags identified the extent of this, including a core of 24 accounts that amplified at least seven of these unique hashtags over the period. Taken into account with the fact that these accounts present themselves as social media marketers or influencers, their engagements with these many hashtags suggests their activity is coordinated.

In addition to the coordinated amplification on X, the campaign also extended to real-world activations and off platform websites created specifically for this campaign:

- Apparent 'vox pop' interviews conducted with allegedly random South Africans were also amplified by the network. In these interviews, several young black South Africans were questioned about their voting choice, and with no exception they all indicated that although they had previously voted for the DA, they would not in the coming election. While these responses are plausible this does suggest a highly selective approach to interviewing 'ordinary members of public'.

Chart 18: 'Vox pop' interviews

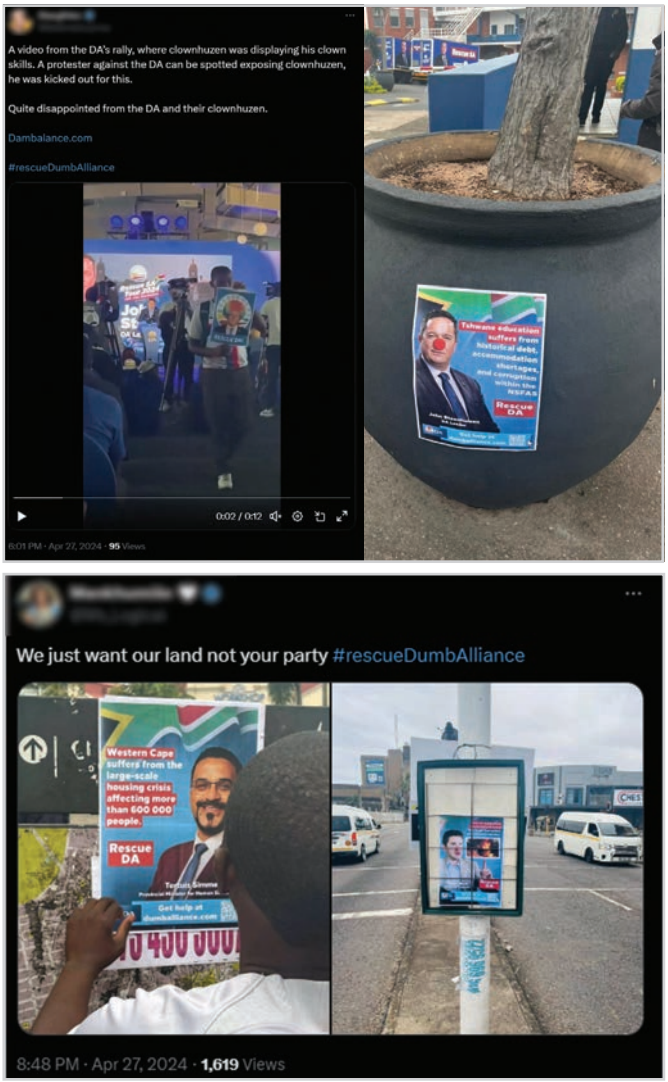


- Multiple accounts linked to an iMzansi.com article by an anonymous user that last published articles in 2020. The article referenced a poll by the Social Research Foundation that suggested the DA is losing support in the Western Cape.

Chart 19: iMzansi.com article

- Multiple real-world posters were identified among the media posted by the accounts in this network. Posters resembling DA-branded election material featuring a URL and QR code to the www.dumballiance.com website were identified refuse bins and lampposts in Durban.

Chart 20: Real-world posters



- Between 1 March 2024 and 30 June 2024, the network generated more than 3 000 posts, replies or reposts that included one or more of the above hashtags as well as a URL to an off platform domain, (www.dumballiance.com). Although the site's content verged on parody – it hosted a two minute-long video of DA leader John Steenhuizen stuttering during interviews, and pictures of him dressed as a clown – it also showcased multiple negative media reports of prominent DA members.

Chart 21: Negative post depicting John Steenhuisen

These amplifications provided additional pivots. For example, we identified 375 accounts that amplified one or more links to the www.dumballiance.com domain (including interesting mentions of a misspelt "www.dambalance.com" domain), the entries related to specific DA politicians on the site or the iMzansi.com article.

An analysis of the social media posts by these accounts that shared links to these URLS helped identify a core cluster of accounts that amplified all of the links to these various domains. This is significant in that all of these accounts were involved in social media marketing campaigns, and they engaged with each and every link to these URLs.

Chart 22: Accounts that amplified links to www.dumballiance.com

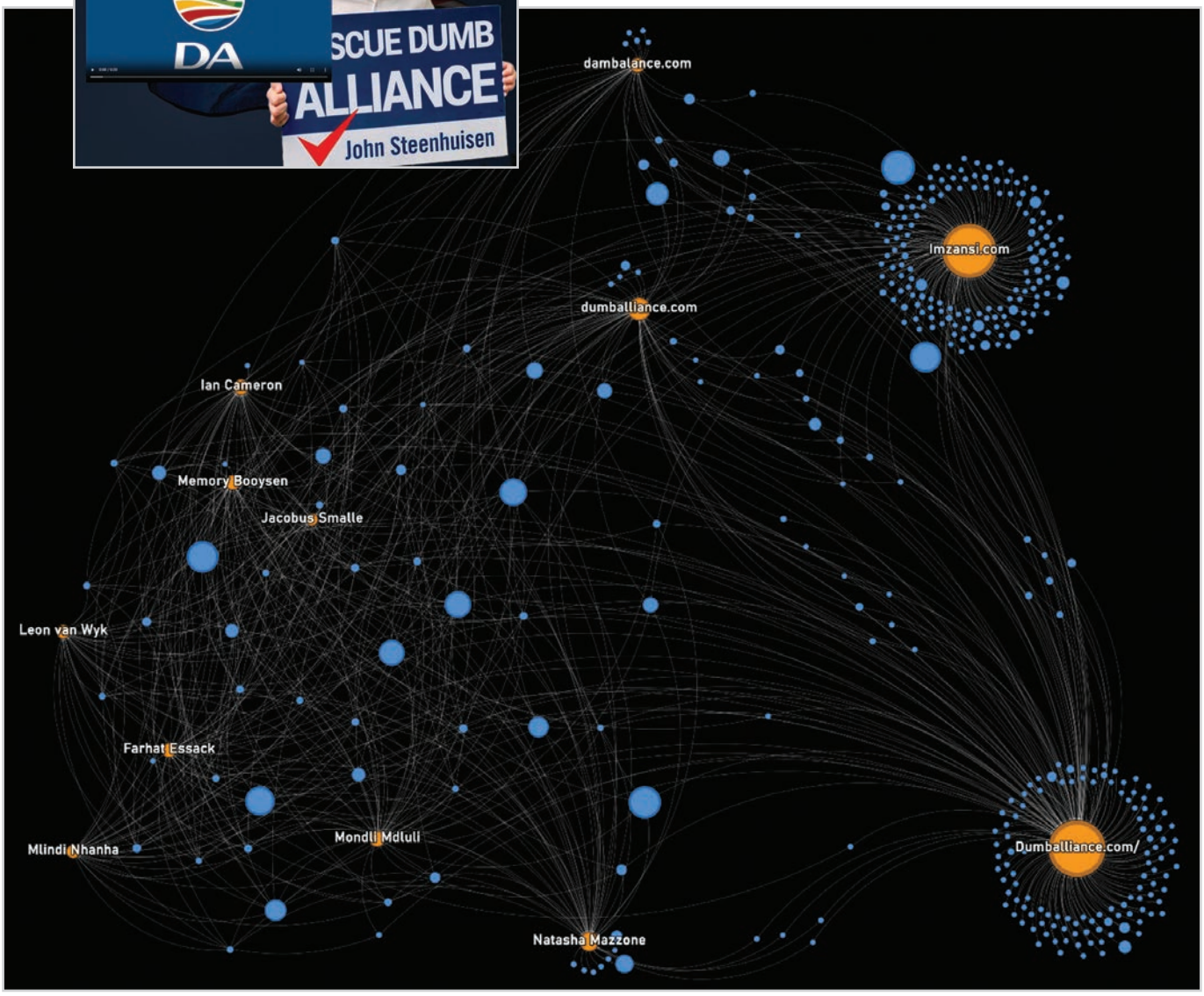


Chart 23: Analysis of the social media posts

No.	Description of user	No. of Followers	Amplified websites?	Amplified hashtags?	X Verified
1	Bio identified as a social media influencer. Linked to a third party influencer marketing website, and two other social media accounts. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	110 185	No	Yes	Yes
2	Bio identified as a content creator. Linked to one other social media account. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	21 826	No	Yes	No
3	Bio indicated the user only engages in paid promotion work. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer. Username was changed after the elections.	297 636	No	Yes	Yes
4	Bio identified as a social media influencer. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	29 661	No	Yes	No
5	Bio identified one other social media account. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	32 161	No	Yes	No
6	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	13 750	No	Yes	Yes
7	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	8 989	No	Yes	No
8	Account has been suspended. Prior allegations this account was using another user's profile image.	N/A	No	Yes	N/A
9	Account has been suspended.	N/A	No	Yes	N/A
10	Bio identified as a blogger. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer. Profile image found online.	3 020	No	Yes	No
11	Bio identified as a social media influencer and open to promotion work. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	4 800	No	Yes	No
12	Bio identified as a social media influencer. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	23 129	No	Yes	Yes
13	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	46 745	Yes	Yes	Yes
14	Bio identified as a social media influencer, content creator and open for promotion work. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	50 629	Yes	Yes	Yes
15	Bio identified as a social media influencer. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	37 495	Yes	Yes	Yes
16	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	23 679	Yes	Yes	Yes
17	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	32 216	Yes	No	No
18	Bio indicated the user is open for promotion work. Linked to an email address and one other social media account. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	35 570	Yes	No	Yes

No.	Description of user	No. of Followers	Amplified websites?	Amplified hashtags?	X Verified
19	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	35 929	Yes	Yes	Yes
20	Bio indicated user engages in paid promotion work. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer. Username was changed after the elections.	318 549	Yes	Yes	No
21	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	13 851	Yes	No	No
22	Bio identified as a social media influencer. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	33 328	Yes	No	No
23	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	21 359	Yes	No	No
24	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	303 572	Yes	Yes	No
25	Bio identified as a social media influencer. Linked to one other social media account. User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	121 231	Yes	Yes	Yes
26	User's timeline was indicative of a social media influencer.	71 101	Yes	Yes	Yes

The domain was registered using a privacy proxy to obfuscate the name of the domain owners, and no transparent indications of the sites ownership or funding were disclosed. The video metadata of the Steenhuizen video clip revealed it was generated in a different timezone to South Africa (GMT +3 instead of GMT+2) but revealed no further evidence regarding the domain owners.

The content shared by these accounts were not considered, and would in any event be irrelevant. For the most part, these accounts shared what could be considered valid political opinion, barring a few examples that diverged into allegations of vote rigging on the part of the DA, or calls to boycott the polls. However, the lack of transparency around the network, its paid-for nature masquerading as organic engagement and the questions around the origin of the website and real-world activations means voters exposed to any of these narratives would not be able to make an informed decision that included the source of these messages.

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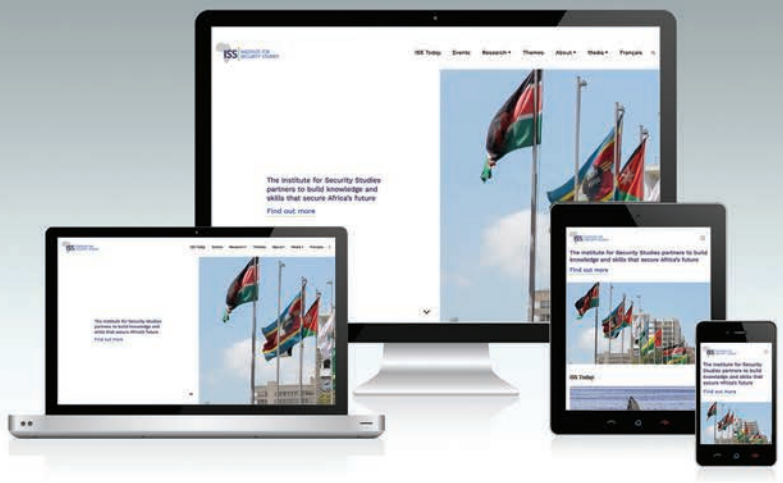

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