



Working for Democracy:

#PhalaPhalaFarmGate: Manufacturing Dissent

Deep Dive Report

Report date range: 1 June - 15 September 2022

Release date: 19 October 2022

Table of contents

Introduction	2
Research Methodology	2
Findings summary	3
Timeline of events	5
Key metrics	7
Mention volume over time across Twitter and digital media (news)	8
Top Hashtags	9
Disaggregated mention volume over time	12
Author Analysis	14
Network Analysis	17
Conclusion	29
Appendix A	30
Appendix B	38

Disclaimer:

The CABC, Daily Maverick and City Press are currently involved in legal proceedings initiated by Sphithiphithi Evaluator (@_AfricanSoil), Thabo Makwakwa (@ThaboMakwakwa), Modibe Modiba (@mmodiba10) and Izwe Lethu (@LandNoli) who seek to review and set aside two reports: [Online RET Network Analysis](#); and [The Dirty Dozen & the Amplification of Incendiary Content during the Outbreak of Unrest in South Africa in July 2021](#). These proceedings are opposed and the CABC, Daily Maverick and City Press seek to have them set aside with costs.

Introduction

This report is a deep dive into one of the most consistently popular hashtags within South Africa's online democracy conversation and as such forms part of the CABC's *Working For Democracy* project. #PhalaPhalaFarmGate has been a top 10 trending hashtag within the democracy conversation since the second week of June 2022 and has remained there ever since. The popularity and longevity of the hashtag are noteworthy and warranted a closer look to understand why it has remained popular over the last 16 weeks. This report follows the CABC's four previously released *Democracy* bi-weekly reports which highlighted the rise of #PhalaPhalaFarmGate in addition to the associated narratives that have underpinned its sustained success as a top 10 trending hashtag. This report has analysed online conversations from 1 June - 15 September 2022.

Research Methodology

The CABC made use of *Brandwatch* and other social media analytic tools such as *TruthNest* and *Botometer* to collate the information presented in this report. The query, upon which the #PhalaPhalaFarmGate dashboard is based, includes carefully curated keywords to capture as much of the conversation as possible. These keywords are made up of iterations of the main hashtag as well as associated hashtags such as #CyrilMustResign, #RamaphosaMustGo, #CyrilMustFall, #stepaside and #noconfidencevote in addition to words like scandal and robbery. *TruthNest* and *Botometer* were used to analyse the most active users of #PhalaPhalaFarmGate during the study period, with the intention of being able to comment on the authenticity of these accounts and the conversations they are involved in. Both of these tools rate accounts in terms of authenticity based on their Twitter activity. These tools are best used to compliment Brandwatch research findings, as opposed to providing binary conclusions on account authenticity. A network analysis was conducted on accounts identified as having the highest potential for inauthenticity.

Content sources for the various dashboards include Twitter, news publications and blogs. It is important to note that international content was also considered for this report, i.e. international media publications regarding the Phala Phala scandal. This is in contrast with the bi-weekly reports, in which only South African content is considered. The findings herein do not represent an exhaustive account of broader South African or international society, and at best should be viewed as indicative of the nature of online conversations and narratives discussed. Twitter, the main platform from which our data is collected, has outsized influence when compared to other social media platforms as most politicians have accounts and all media houses make extensive use of the platform, hence conversations on Twitter can move rapidly from Twitter to traditional media and other social media platforms.

Even though only 15% of South Africans have Twitter accounts, the site is still frequented by more than 50% of the population, according to *World Wide Worx's Social Media Landscape 2022 report*. Hence, the Twitter activity often serves as an early warning of what conversations and narratives may penetrate the broader societal ecosystem and become normative.

Findings summary

In the course of our research into the conversation about democracy in SA, our team found that the #phalaphalafarmgate consistently garnered high traction during the report date range. We decided to research this content further and found that:

- The #PhalaPhalaFamGate hashtag has been responsible for sustained anti-Ramaphosa sentiment since the beginning of June, and has remained a top 10 hashtag within South Africa's online democracy conversation since then;
- The volume of the conversation around #PhalaPhalaFarmGate saw a number of peaks between 1 June and 15 September. While the posts within these peaks correlate with news events, the CABC detected some instances where Twitter users deliberately used #PhalaPhalaFarmGate - and related hashtags - to keep the conversation among the top trending topics;
- The week of June 27 saw the highest traction (hashtag posts). That peak in activity, however, did not correlate with coverage in digital news or conversation about the event not containing the hashtag;
- A group of suspicious accounts were found to be unusually active in promoting the hashtag. This group was analysed by a number of tools and returned scores that indicate a very high probability of inauthentic activity;
- This group also represented just 0.2% of the unique authors engaged in the conversation and were responsible for nearly 20% of the posts on topic;
- We selected the two most active accounts during the time period for a granular activity analysis and found highly suspicious behaviour;
- Singular focus of the accounts (anti-Ramaphosa) and historical activity, indicating that there is a network that has been in operation for some at least 18 months (clear pattern of activity). We are not sure how long it has been active;

- There is clear evidence that key proponents of the RET Twitter network, first identified by the CABC in May 2021, and then re-encountered in the CABC's [Dirty Dozen](#) report relating to the July 2021 violent unrest in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, are behind the sustained prominence and narrative manipulation within the #PhalaPhalaFarmGate online conversation. Accounts such as @_AfricanSoil and @LandNoli, found time and time again to display inauthentic behaviour in CABC reports, have been identified as central to the network and pivotal in content creation;
- The CABC remains a non-partisan organisation. Ours is not to take a stance, but to investigate online narratives and to inform and educate South Africans about the conversations around these narratives and the tactics used to sustain them.

Timeline of events

The Genesis of #PhalaPhalaFarmGate

A chronological timeline of the events leading up to the now ever-present #PhalaPhalaFarmGate

9 FEBRUARY 2020

Break in at President Cyril Ramaphosa's Phala Phala game farm in Limpopo



Modiba Modibe posts a tweet stating that Arthur Fraser will be arrested for dropping a big bomb on Chief Justice Raymond Zondo



27 MAY 2022

The tweet explains that "the establishment" wants Arthur Fraser out and behind bars before he can spill the beans.

1 JUNE 2022

Fraser claims that the president was involved in defeating the ends of justice, kidnapping of the suspects, interrogating and bribing them and then concealing the crime from police.



4 JUNE 2022

Sunday Independent (an IOL publication) runs an article containing a video of the break in.

Article written by Mzilikazi Wa Afrika and does not contain a video of the break in.

5 JUNE 2022

This marks the president's first public response on the matter since Arthur Fraser laid charges.

6 JUNE 2022

Tweet with minimal traction.



view more of our reports on www.cabc.org.za

Narrative evolution of #PhalaPhalaFarmGate over time

The tweet implies that the president is guilty of (1) failure to report a crime, (2) engaging in other paid work and (3) possession of excess foreign currency.

[illegible]

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
 Washington, DC

1001 UNIVERSITY CITY BLVD NW
 WASHINGTON, DC 20004

PHONE: 202/341-5000
 FAX: 202/341-5000
 E-MAIL: info@american.edu
 WWW: www.american.edu

1001 UNIVERSITY CITY BLVD NW
 WASHINGTON, DC 20004

The tweet suggests that under Ramaphosa crime and kidnapping has increased, money laundering and selling SOEs is on the rise in addition to high petrol prices and inflation rates.

Tweet encourages others to retweet in a bid to keep #PhalaPhalaFarmGate trending.

4. *What is the main message of the passage?*
 A. The importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.
 B. The benefits of regular exercise and a balanced diet.
 C. The challenges of staying motivated during a fitness routine.
 D. The role of mental health in overall well-being.

There's no National Plan to address poverty, unemployment, inequality.

Yet it's the nation's richest 1% (BROOKINGS INSTITUTE)

He said it 100 days after we've all agreed money is what we need to get out from under this mess.

What does money mean? ... credit ...

21 JULY 2022
High traction tweet implying that the president has not delivered on his SCNA promises

ATM is wanting president Ramaposhu to be impeached on the basis of constitutional violation relating to the Phala Phala farm heist.

[illegible]

This sentiment began at a Women's Day event where members of Real Democracy unsuccessfully attempted to make a citizen's arrest of the president but grew into a significant online conversation.

[illegible]

The president's words are misinterpreted (possibly purposefully) in the tweet.

#PhalaPhalaFarmGate has been responsible for sustained anti-Ramaphosa sentiment since the middle of June 2022 has remained a top 10 hashtag within South Africa's online democracy conversation since then

view more of our reports on www.cabp.org.za

Key metrics

During the reporting period, more than 1.39 million mentions about the Phala Phala scandal were created by almost 103k unique authors (figure 1). Every unique author, therefore, accounts for roughly 13 mentions. Total retweets stand at more than 1.22 million, resulting in a retweet percentage of 88% for the conversation. This percentage is significantly higher when compared to those reported in our previous bi-weekly reports. Given the “snapshot” nature of a bi-weekly report, the retweet percentage can vary from one iteration to the next. The retweet percentage reported here, however, can be viewed as a strong proxy for the nature of the conversation over an extended period of time. Such a high retweet percentage indicates fewer individuals partaking in the conversation with their own thoughts, opting instead to retweet the views of others.

A retweet percentage of 88% points to minimal original authors that are contributing to the conversation and sharing their own ideas and thoughts within the conversation. A very high retweet percentage, as is the case for this conversation, casts doubt on the authenticity of the conversation as it may point to coordination by a group of tweeters to amplify specific content.



Figure 1: Key insights into the conversation about the Phala Phala farm robbery between 1 June - 15 September 2022



Figure 2: Additional metrics measuring conversation about the Phala Phala farm robbery between 1 June - 15 September 2022

Mention volume over time across Twitter and digital media (news)

According to CABC data, the total mention volume of this conversation during the specified time period is 1.39 million posts. Of these 1.39 million posts, 50% (696 873) were tweets containing #PhalaPhalaFarmGate hashtag or its variations.

27 031 articles related to the Phala Phala scandal were published by digital media outlets world-wide during the same time period. These three categories² of the conversation also peaked at different times, with the highest peak of 177 183 being recorded (during the week June 27 to July 3) among the posts containing #PhalaPhalaFarmGate and other variations of the hashtag.

The CABC noted a number of spikes within the conversation about the Phala Phala scandal between 1 June and 15 September 2022, as depicted in figure 3 below.

While most of these spikes correlated with news events around the Phala Phala scandal, we also noted a number of instances where some Twitter users made deliberate attempts to keep the hashtag in the top trending topics, even when there was no significant news coverage and organic social media conversation about the farmgate.

For these users, it was important that South Africans “stay focused” and never forget to hold Ramaphosa accountable.

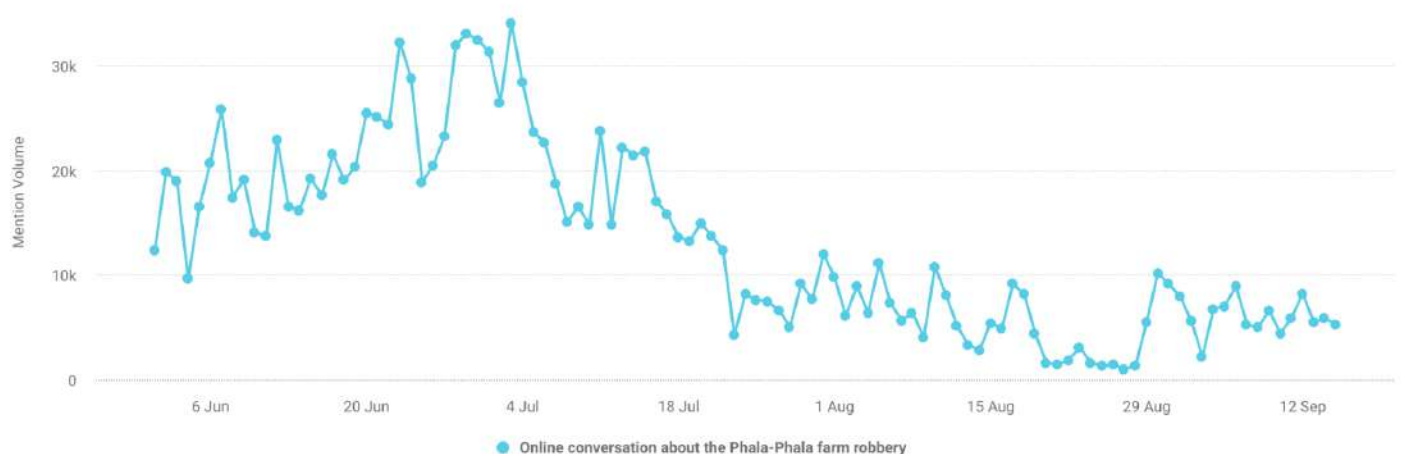


Figure 3: Aggregated Mention Volume of the Phala Phala farm robbery conversation between 1 June - 15 September 2022³

² The three categories are: posts on Twitter about the Phala Phala farm robbery that did not contain the #phalaphalafarmgate or its variations, posts that did contain the hashtag or its variations, and digital media publications about the robbery)

³ Content sources: Twitter and digital media publications

Top Hashtags

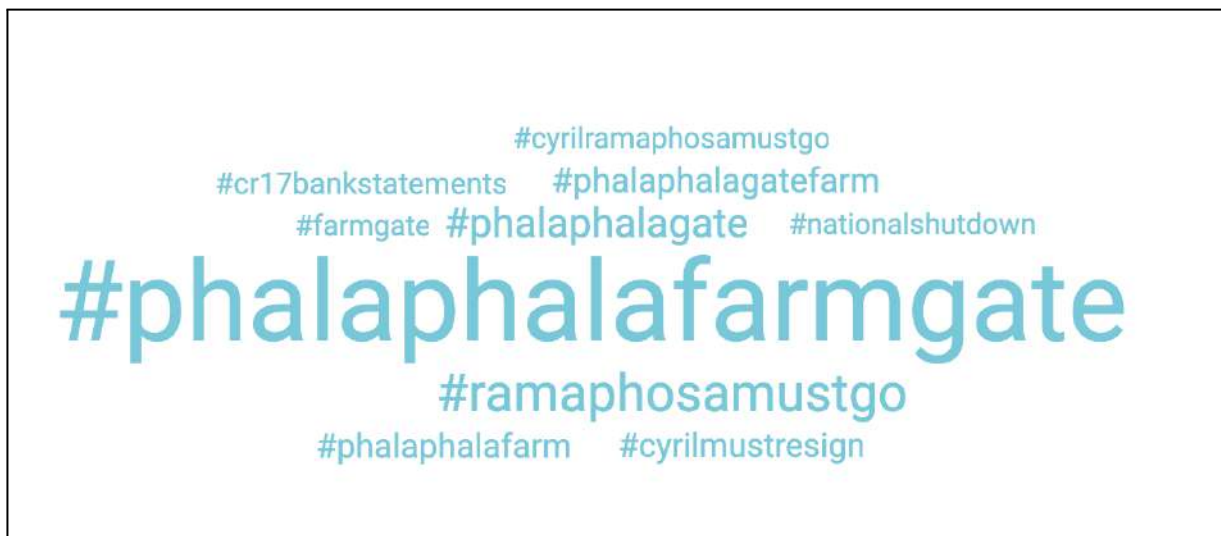


Figure 4: Top 10 hashtags in the conversation.

The Phala Phala scandal has garnered a series of anti-Ramaphosa hashtags online. Hashtags such as #PhalaPhalaFarmGate, #farmgate, #PhalaPhalaFarm, #PhalaPhalaGate and #PhalaPhalaGateFarm are directly related to the robbery and the surrounding events.

Others, such as #cyrilmustresign, #RamaphosaMustGo and #NationalShutdown refer to online users' calls for Ramaphosa to be removed from office, either due to the farmgate robbery and/or the increased price of fuel and load shedding.

As the seventh most popular hashtag with more than 40k mentions in this conversation, #CR17BankStatements, is used as an additional reason to substantiate why Ramaphosa should resign.



Top (highest traction) Posts

Most retweeted posts on the week of June 27, in the category of "Posts containing #PhalaPhalaFarmGate (w/ variations)"⁴

@MzwaneleManyi's [post](#), which encourages Twitter users to keep #PhalaPhalaFarmGate at the top of the trending list, became the most retweeted in the conversation, with 2815 times retweets at the time of this report. This is an example of distributed amplification, whereby an account explicitly (as in this case) or implicitly directs participants to rapidly and widely disseminate certain material, which may include propaganda and misinformation (The Media Manipulation Casebook, 2022)⁵.



This was followed by a [tweet](#) from @ModibeModiba which alleges that “Ramaphosa has revealed in an affidavit that he reached a secret deal with Deputy Public Protector Gcaleka to extend the deadline for the 31 questions on #PhalaPhalaFarmGate to 18 July without informing the nation on such a crucial burning issue?”. At a close second, this post was retweeted about 1700 times. In 2020 Modibe Modiba made claims that national newspaper, *Daily Maverick*, offered to pay him a stipend to write articles taking a certain position. In 2022 the High Court ruled that these claims were disinformation, labelling them “patently false and defamatory”.

⁴ Seen below in Figure 5, Figure 8

⁵ <https://mediamanipulation.org/sites/default/files/media-files/Code-Book-1.4-Jan-7-2022.pdf>



Most retweeted posts on the week of June 6, in the category of "Conversations about the Phala Phala incident"⁶⁷

The images below show the highest traction posts within the conversation around the Phala Phala incident. The first is a high-traction tweet from the digital media outlet WION News, a Indian multinational English language news channel headquartered in New Delhi⁸⁹. The second post expresses institutional mistrust and is from an account with 16k followers.



⁶ #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag and its variations excluded

⁷ Seen below in Figure 5, Figure 7

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WION>

⁹ Found to be a credible news site by KnowNews from Media Monitoring Africa (<https://mediamonitoringafrica.org/online-tools/>)

Disaggregated mention volume over time

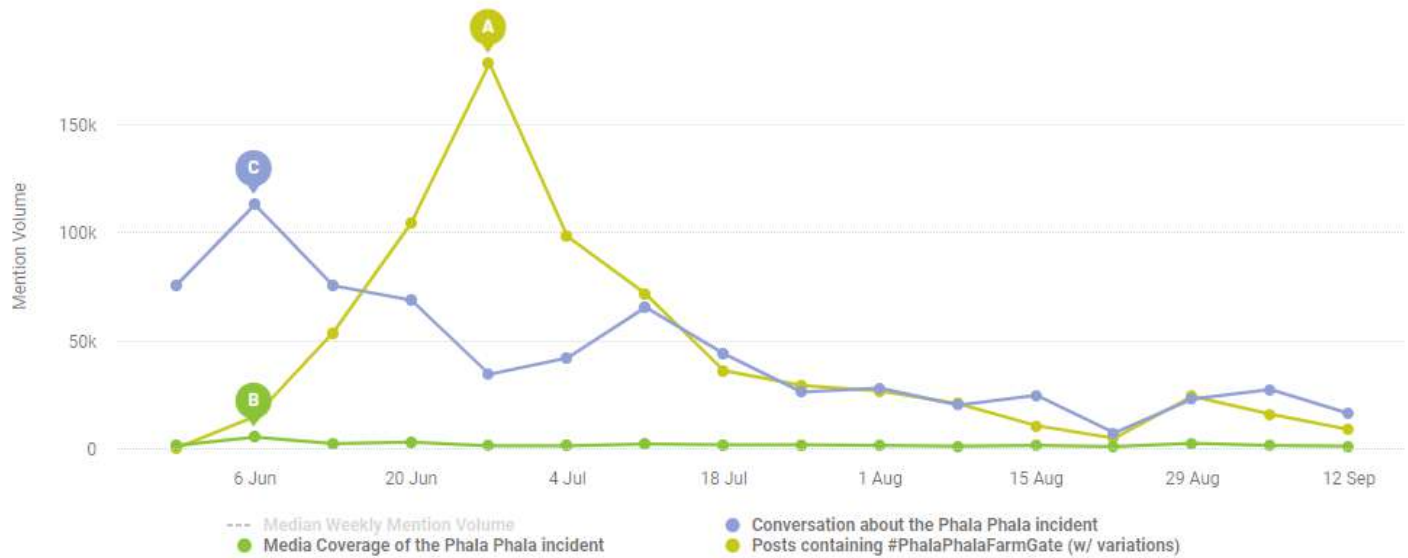


Figure 5: Mention volume over time by categories

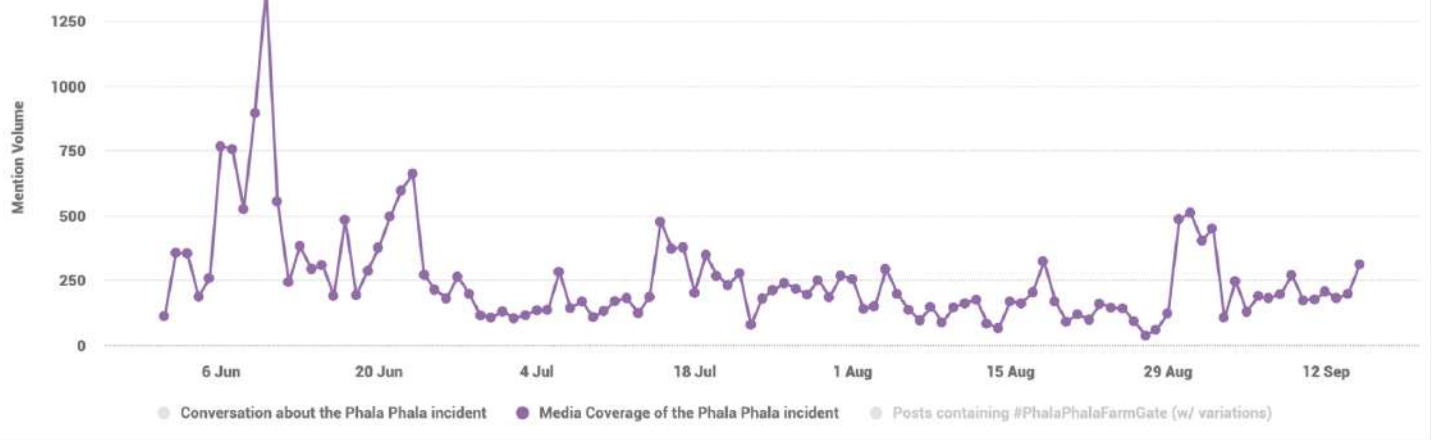


Figure 6: Mention volume of digital media (news) articles about the Phala Phala scandal

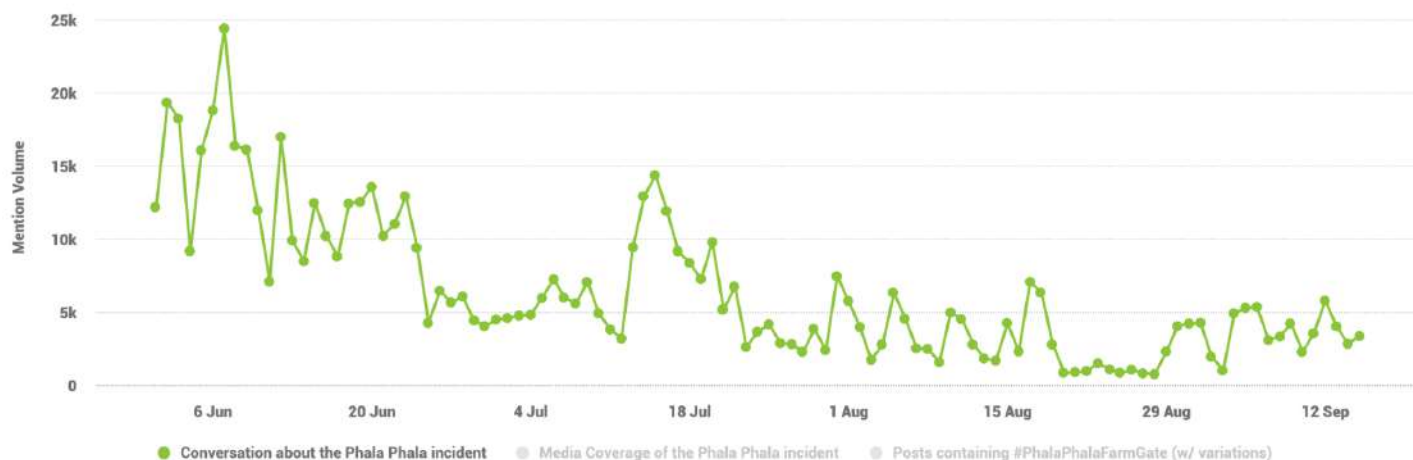


Figure 7: Mention volume of conversation about Phala Phala on Twitter¹⁰

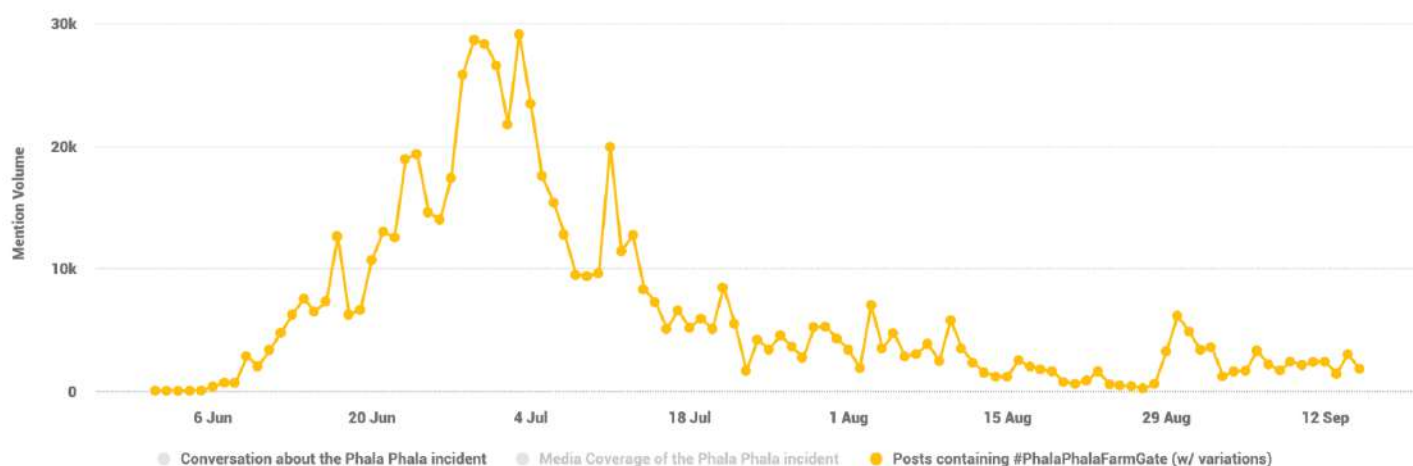


Figure 8: Mention volume of posts on Twitter containing the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag (or its variations)¹¹

Our timeline into the peaks within this entire conversation (Figure 3) reveals that the highest peak in conversation, which took place in the week of 27 June, coincided with a detected pattern of some Twitter accounts urging others to keep #PhalaPhalaFarmGate at the top of the trending lists.

The conversation about the Phala Phala incident and the media coverage thereof (figures 6 and 7) show two coinciding peaks, on the week of June 6. As CABR recorded earlier in this report, this was the same week when President Cyril Ramaphosa suspended Public Protector Busisiwe Mkhwebane and when opposition parties including the EFF called on the President to 'step-aside.'

¹⁰ #phalaphalafarmgate and its variations excluded

¹¹ Variations: #PhalaPhalaGateFarm, #PhalaPhalaGate, #Farmgate

Figure 8 shows the mention volume over time of posts containing the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag and its variations. We note that there was a significant spike in mention volume of these posts during the week of June 27 through July 5. Figure 6 shows that there was not a spike in digital media articles on the Phala Phala scandal published during these dates. Rather, a period of relatively low activity can be observed in the mention volume of digital media articles *and* conversation about Twitter about the Phala Phala scandal not containing the hashtags during these dates (Figures 6 and 7).

This raises a question about what led to the increased mention volume of posts containing the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag (and its variations) during the week of June 27, as there was not a correlated increase in digital media publications on the topic or conversation about the topic on Twitter that did not contain these hashtags.

Author Analysis

Author Significance and Impact

CABC found a total of 690 367 tweets containing the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag (or its variations) during the time period covered by this report. Amongst these posts, 172 accounts tweeted the #PhalaPhalaFarmGate hashtag (or its variations) more than 500 times. Collectively, these 172 accounts authored 177 563 tweets with the hashtag or its variations, making up 26% of all tweets that were posted using these hashtags between June 1 and Sept 15.

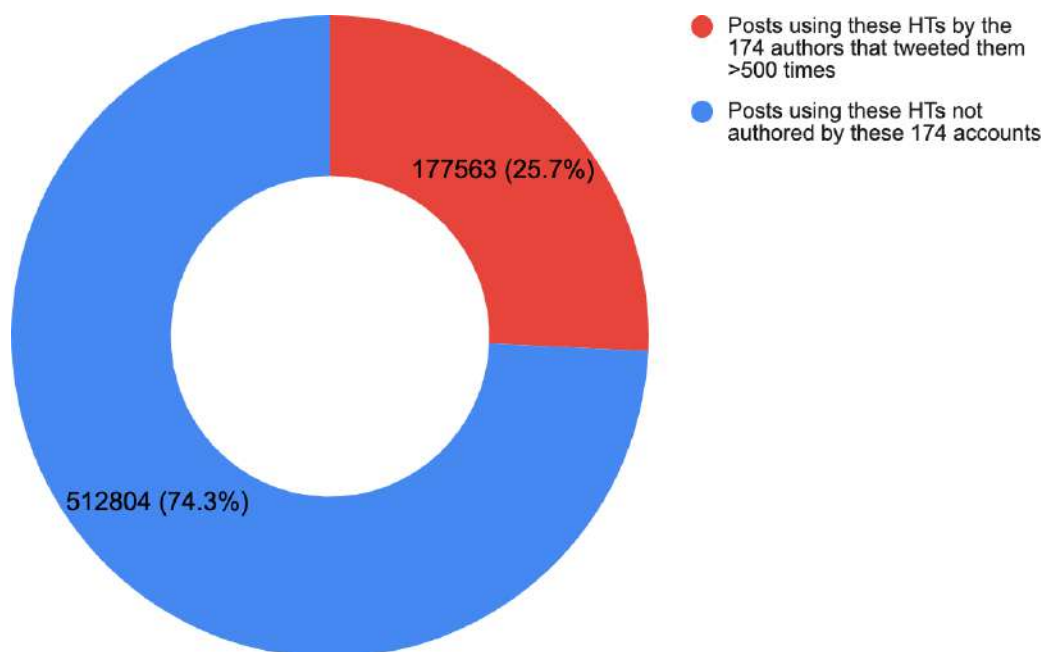


Figure 9: The volume of posts using the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag (or its variations) posted by the 172 accounts that used them more than 500 times (in red) compared with the volume of all posts containing those hashtags not posted by these 172 accounts (in blue)

To further understand the influence that the 172 high tweeting accounts had on the conversation, we removed their Twitter handles from our search category and observed a noteworthy drop. Focusing on the highest peak in conversation in the week of June 27 - July 3 2022, the total number of mentions fell 28.6% from 177 178 to 126 533 when these accounts were removed. This means that the 172 accounts tweeted or retweeted #phalaphalafarmgate (or its variations) nearly 50 645 times in one week, making up nearly one third of all posts using the hashtag on Twitter.

Almost 20% of the entire conversation on Twitter about Phala Phala was driven by these 172 accounts¹². This is highly significant considering that the 172 authors only make up 0.2% of the more than 103k unique authors that engaged in the conversation during the reporting period.

Author Authenticity

Each of these 172 accounts averaged 1 020 tweets using the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag or its variations during the time period covered by this report, ranging from 1 tweet per day for the least active account to 782 tweets containing the hashtag (or its variations) in a single day by the most active account ([@Marumofase77](#))

¹² These 172 accounts were responsible for 263 587 of the total 1 343 725 mentions on Twitter about Phala Phala between June 01 and Sept 15, 2022

on June 27. The identified accounts were all analysed using [TruthNest](#), [Botometer](#) and *Anansi* (the CABC's in-house analytics platform) as a guide to determine the level of inauthentic behaviour exhibited by the identified accounts.

To this end, the average *TruthNest* bot indicator percentage was 60%. Of these 172 accounts, 13 accounts returned a bot indicator percentage of 100%. These scores are based on generally suspicious activity in terms of either a significant difference between following/followed, only posting retweets, too many tweets per day and all tweets containing mentions or a combination of the aforementioned.

Botometer was especially useful in that it categorised these identified accounts in terms of a bot type, which should not be confused with confirming an account is a bot. In this instance, the bot type is merely a description of how a particular account acts. More than 60% of identified accounts behaved as *echo chambers* i.e. accounts that engage in follow-back groups and share political content in high volume (Botometer, 2022)¹³. Echo chambers are mechanisms which reinforce existing group opinions and by extension, shift the entire group's ideology to the extreme (Cinelli et al, 2021)¹⁴.

According to Lerman (2020)¹⁵, echo chambers strengthen polarisation and the divisions in our society. The aforementioned definitions do well to explain the sustained anti-Ramaphosa sentiment that #PhalaPhalaFarmGate is synonymous with and evidenced by various anti-Ramaphosa hashtags. The analytics tool *Anansi* confirmed a suspicion that these identified accounts are generally focussed on retweeting selected political content that drive a specific narrative, in this instance #PhalaPhalaFarmGate. Figure 10 supports this conclusion, showing the most commonly used hashtags, locations, organisations, people, phrases, emojis and keywords used by these 172 accounts between June 01 and Sept 15.

¹³ <https://botometer.osome.iu.edu/>

¹⁴ M. Cinelli et al., *The echo chamber effect on social media*, PNAS vol 118 no.9 (2021)

¹⁵ K. Lerman., *How to Break Out of Your Social Media Echo Chamber*, WIRED (2020)











Most Mentioned Tweeters	TWEETS	RETWEETS	ALL TWEETS ▾	IMPRESSIONS
 @cyrilramaphosa	11581	29370	40951	176423019
 @54battalion	600	24616	25216	75422684
 @gentlements	500	16338	16838	45264944
 @dknmohammed	1228	12621	13849	36106990
 @publicprotector	2887	10501	13388	51384668
 @myanc	3118	6933	10051	43712874
 @news24	3200	5924	9124	37923513
 @npa_prosecutes	1320	7326	8646	28325789
 @presidencyza	2995	4859	7854	28788330
 @mbatha10	239	7484	7723	19747767

Figure 11: Most mentioned Tweeters

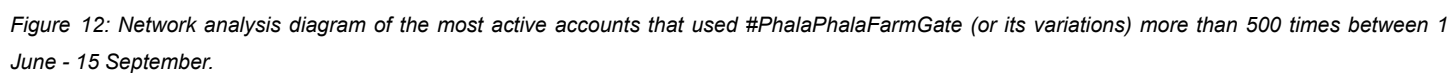
Network Analysis

Well-documented accounts such as @_AfricanSoil and @LandNoli play central, yet different roles within the network. The colour, size and positioning of nodes in figure 12 conveys distinct information about these nodes within the network. The darker the shade of green of the node, the higher the retweet percentage of the node. The larger the size of the node, the higher the number of accounts within the network engaging with the node. The positioning of the node depicts its centrality in the network, with a more central position indicative of a node having greater influence on the network i.e. a mention (tweet or retweet) from a central node will likely have a greater spread through the network. Three types of nodes have been identified in figure 12.

Firstly, **content creator** nodes are characterised by low retweet percentages (pale green) and a central position, these nodes are responsible for producing original content for the network. An example of a content creator node is @_AfricanSoil. This account was uncovered as Zamaswazi Zinhle Majozi.

Secondly, **large central distribution** nodes are characterised by high retweet percentages (very limited original content, darker green colour) and by a large number of accounts in the network retweeting them, hence the larger sized node. An example of a central distribution node is @LandNoli.

Lastly, **amplification** nodes, which occur along the outer layers of the network, have smaller node sizes and high retweet percentages (darker green). These are essentially amplification accounts for the large central distribution accounts. An example of an amplification node is @mytouchrecords. While these nodes may have a smaller influence on this network, they often have large follower bases and are critical in amplifying the message into the larger twittersphere. They also add the appearance of the same message coming from multiple sources which makes the messaging appear more organic and the sentiments more widely felt.



Highly Suspicious Accounts - @Marumofase77

Our analytics platform allowed us to take an even more granular look at the content posted during the week of 27 June - July 03 2022, when the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag (and its variations) reached its peak. On 27 June, [@marumofase77](#) tweeted 879 times between 7am and midnight. 782 of these posts contained the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag or its variations. To tweet 879 times in 17 hours, one would need to tweet every 70 seconds for the entire time period.

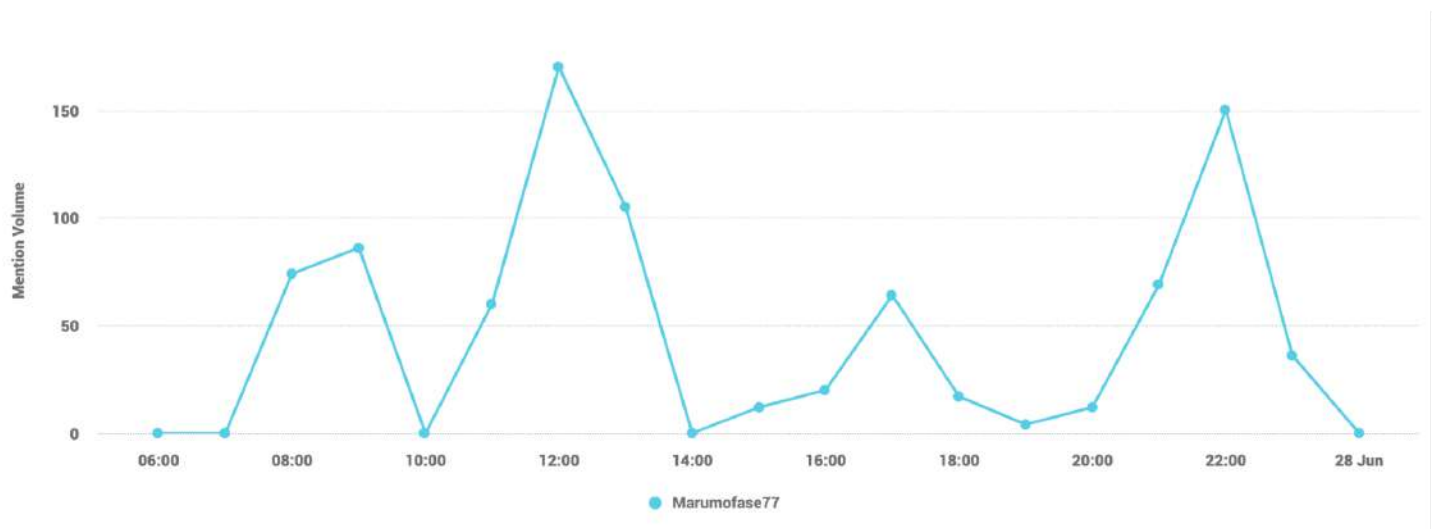


Figure 14: Total mention volume by hour June 27 2022

The tweet volume recorded by this account during this 17 hour period was not, however, evenly distributed at one tweet per 70 seconds over 17 hours. Rather, a series of volume peaks can be observed during the time period (figure 14). At the height of activity at 12:27pm, this user tweeted 13 times in a single minute, averaging a tweet every 4.6 seconds (figure 15). At 12:31 the user tweeted 12 times in a minute, again tweeted 12 times in a minute at 12:34, followed by 11 tweets in a minute at 12:37 and another 11 tweets in a minute at 12:38.

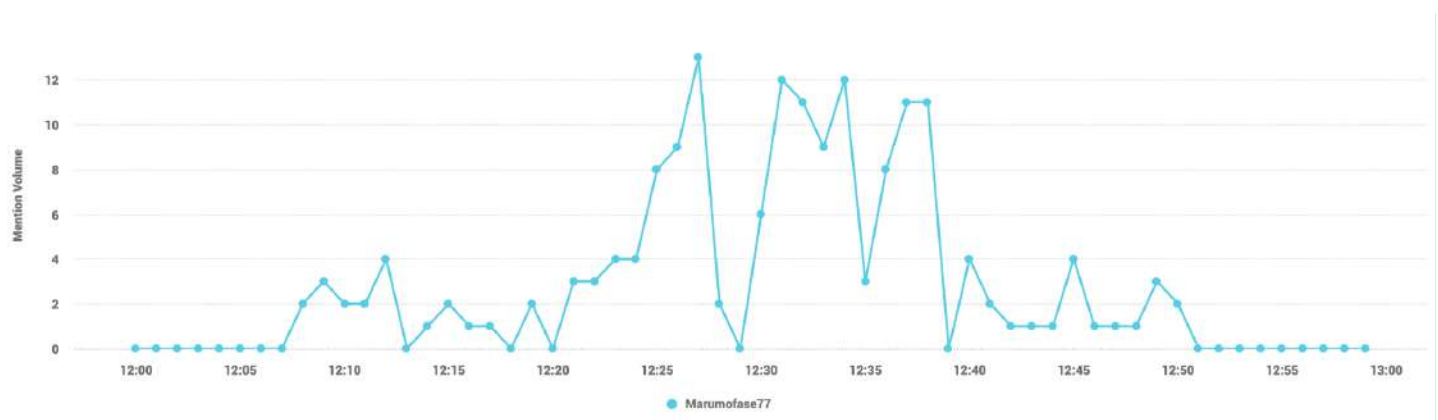


Figure 15: Total mention volume by minute between 12:00 and 13:00 on June 27, 2022

The CABC regards these elevated activity levels to be highly irregular and a cause of suspicion. Examples of the posts tweeted by this account in the space of a minute are shown below and appear to be made up of retweets of posts containing the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag or its variations or replies to these tweets. Nearly all of these replies consist of identical blocks of text containing a series of anti-Ramaphosa hashtags. An example is shown below.



This meets the definition of *coppypasta*, a media manipulation tactic defined in the Media Monitoring Casebook (2022)¹⁶ as “any block of text that is repeatedly reposted, often on social media, messaging apps, online discussion forums, and comments sections.”

Using generic keywords and hashtags, i.e. ones that are not related to anything political on social media, a researcher at the CABC tried to replicate this behaviour. As a skilled internet and Twitter user, over 3 attempts, the highest number of retweets and replies that they could generate in the space of a minute using a standard laptop with a scroll pad was 7. This indicates that one of the 172 accounts is able to function at almost double the speed of a literate internet and Twitter user. @Marumofase77 scored 80% for *Truthnest's* Bot Indicator and 3.4 out of 5 *Botometer* score. In our view, there is a high probability that this account is either being controlled by software, operated by multiple users or a combination of both.

¹⁶ <https://mediamanipulation.org/sites/default/files/media-files/Code-Book-1.4-Jan-7-2022.pdf>

Zooming out from this granularity, we observe that this individual account returned 782 mentions on 27 June 2022 with the hashtag, and that it retweeted a further 10 mentions that contained the keywords “phala phala” without using a hashtag. See figure 16 below. This suspicious activity did not take place on just one particular day, it occurred over a series of weeks, establishing a clear pattern of activity of using #PhalaPhalaFarmGate to keep the topic trending. Assessing the days around the highest peak, we noted the following number of posts for this account in the conversation:

Date	Posts containing #phalaphalafarmgate or one of its variations	Posts containing keywords phala phala but no hashtags
25 June	104	4
26 June	185	11
28 June	600	16
29 June	646	11

Table 1: @Marumofase77 Twitter activity over selected days around the highest peak in conversation.



Figure 16: Example tweets by @Marumofase77 on 27 June.

Highly Suspicious Accounts - @AZANIA_magwala

This account drew our attention because of the 172 accounts analysed in this report, it was the most active over the entire reporting period. Total account activity by this user reached 43 437 posts between June 01 and Sept 15, ranging between 160 and 933 posts per day. 97% of these posts were retweets (figure 17).

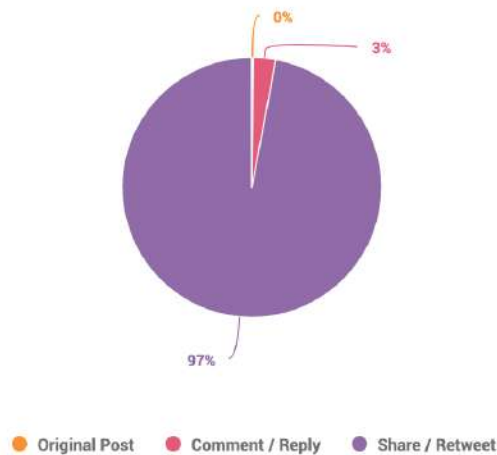


Figure 17: Mention volume by mention type @AZANIA_magwala June 01 - Sept 15

Of these posts, 2 486 contained the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtag or one of its variations. Although this account used the #phalaphalafarmgate hashtags fewer times than @Marumofase77, figure 18 shows that nonetheless it remained primarily focused on promoting content containing anti-Ramaphosa sentiment. Figure 19 shows the top 20 hashtags used by @AZANIA_magwala over the reporting period which clearly indicates the account's anti-Ramaphosa sentiment.



AZANIA MAGWALA @azania_magwala 🔍

Black Child it's not yet Uhuru.

Activity: **High** Influence: **High**

Bot Indicators: ⓘ  100%

 SUSPICIOUS FOLLOWERS

 SPAM

📅 Joined 19 Nov 2016 [check first posts](#)

🔗 —

📍 The trenches

🔊 —

Tweets
437.8K

Following
7.9K

Followers
7.1K

Listed
10

⚠️ No rest during the day >

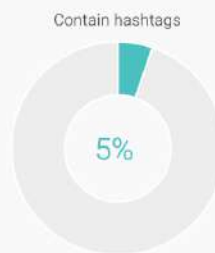
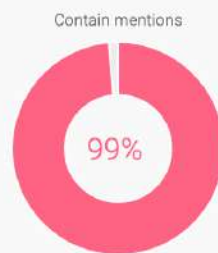
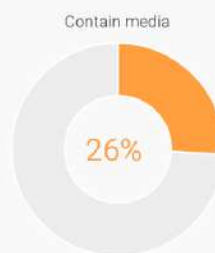
⚠️ Only posting retweets >

⚠️ Almost all tweets contain mentions >

⚠️ Too many tweets per day >

Tweets' Content

Percentage of tweets containing links, media, mentions and hashtags based on last 2186 posts by @azania_magwala



Posting Frequency

Post frequency (posts/day) by @azania_magwala

Overall (since 19-11-2016)



Recently (last 2186 posts)



Figure 19: Truthnest analysis of @AZANIA_magwala showing bot indicator probability rate, suspicious activity flags, tweet content by percentage and posting frequency (as of 5 October 2022)

[Botometer](#), a free-to-use tool from the Indiana University Observatory on Social Media (OSoMe) gives this account an overall score of 4 out of 5¹⁸. It rates highest for echo chamber activity, defined as “accounts that engage in follow back groups and share and delete political content in high volume.”

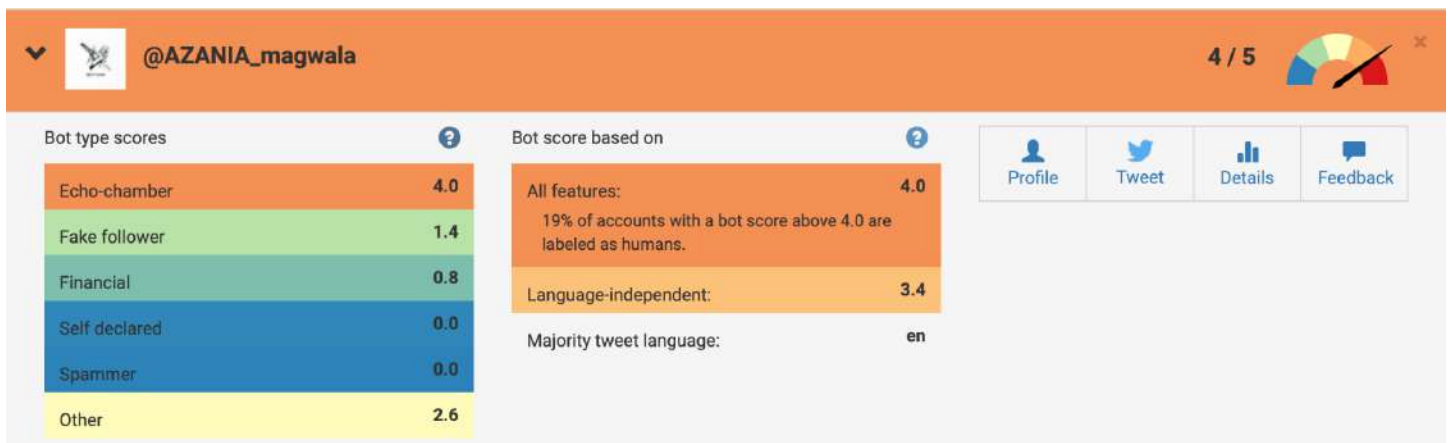


Figure 20: Botometer analysis of @AZANIA_magwala

¹⁸ With zero being most human-like and five being the most bot-like

Conclusion

One of the key features of being an active citizen is participating in democratic processes, holding leaders accountable and educating others about their role in society. Used authentically, social media can help make this process quicker, easier and more impactful. However, the popularity of these online communication tools has also made it easier for networks, similar to the ones covered in this report, to manipulate conversations. When a network of 172 authors (0.2%) contributes 100 times more by proportion to a conversation, scrutiny needs to be applied. Attempts to drown out potentially constructive debates with one-sided narratives aimed at supporting a particular campaign limit people's access to factful information. This became evident when some of the accounts in this report stated that their goal was to continuously keep the conversation at the top of the trending lists.

The top 10 democracy hashtags are very likely inorganic, derived from the continued coordinated retweeting of the hashtag from the online RET network. The reappearance of some of these accounts on the CABC radar over a period of around 18 months continues to be a cause for concern in respect of inauthentically skewing the conversation. Left to operate without intervention, these accounts will continue to threaten future conversations, all with the aim of supporting the pro-Zuma - anti-Ramaphosa campaign to an extent that includes blurring the lines between fact and fiction. In all this, it is essential to note that the CABC remains a non-partisan organisation. Ours is not to take a stance, but to investigate online narratives and to inform and educate South Africans about the conversations around these narratives and the tactics used to sustain them.

Appendix A

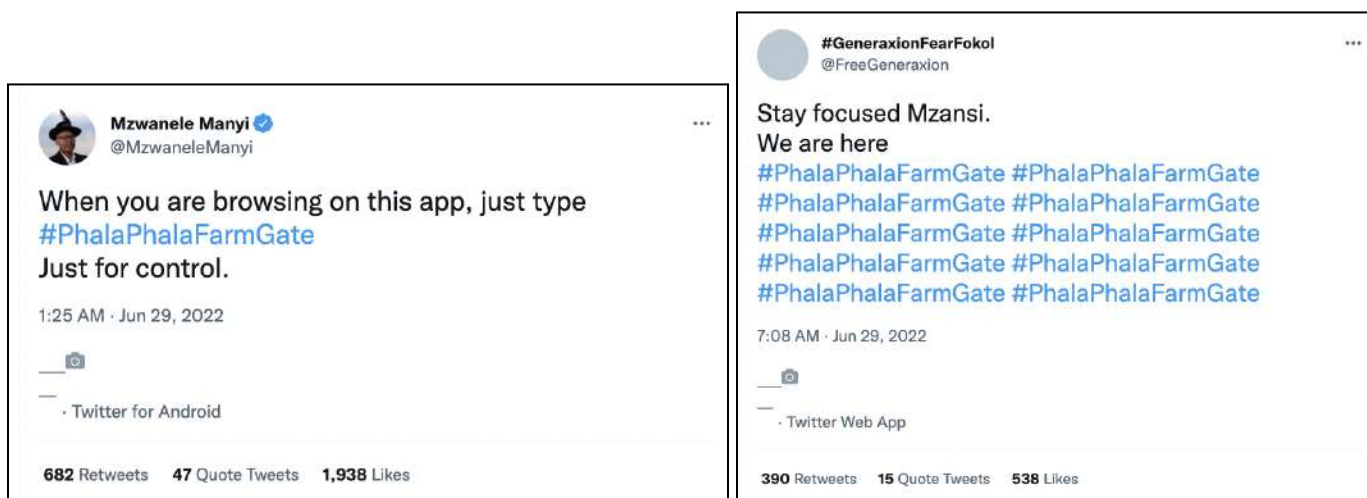
Peaks within the Phala Phala scandal conversation on social media:

- 2 June 2022: Spike in conversation driven by the social media responses to reports, made on June 1, that Arthur Fraser laid a criminal complaint against President Cyril Ramaphosa. On June 2, President Cyril Ramaphosa admitted that there was a robbery on his farm.
- 7 June 2022: The EFF releases visual “[evidence](#)” of the robbery that took place at President Ramaphosa’s farm. The party also holds a media briefing where leader Julius Malema calls for Ramaphosa to “[step aside](#)” until investigations into the robbery are completed. Social media also reacts to the arrests of Atul and Rajesh Gupta in Dubai. News of the arrest began circulating on 6 June. Some social media users claim that the Gupta arrests are aimed at diverting attention away from the Phala Phala scandal. These claims are later [rubbed](#) by Justice Minister Ronald Lamola.



- 9 June 2022 Social media reacts to President Cyril Ramaphosa’s decision to [suspend](#) Public Protector Busisiwe Mkhwebane.
- 12 June 2022: Reports emerge that Mkhwebane, before her suspension, had sent Ramaphosa [31 questions](#) regarding the farmgate robbery.
- 15 June 2022: Arthur Fraser reportedly releases a statement which alleges that he met with the Hawks and “furnished them with additional information and details to enable them to do their work”.

- 17 June 2022: The release of the final Zondo commission report into state capture - which was due to be handed over to President Cyril Ramaphosa is [delayed](#). Some social media users attributed the delay to Arthur Fraser's criminal complaint against Ramaphosa.
- 20 June 2022: The presidency releases a statement on the delayed release of the final state capture report.
- 23 June 2022: Online conversation is based on the final state capture report, which was handed over to Ramaphosa on 22 June. A number of Twitter users argue that the report will not distract them from focusing on the Phala Phala scandal.
- 29 June 2022: There appears to be a number of Twitter users randomly tweeting '#PhalaPhalaFarmGate' to keep it at the top of the trending list. The conversation received more than 30 000 mentions on this day.



- 3 July 2022: Online conversation is centred around [loadshedding](#) and the ANC. While some users blame Eskom for the blackouts, others argue that the fault lies with [President Ramaphosa](#). Conspiracy theories around the death of Jackson Mthembu, the former minister in the presidency, also circulate around this time. Despite reports that Mthembu died of Covid-19 related complications, some media users blame President Cyril Ramaphosa for his death. According to these [bogus theories](#), Mthembu was on the verge of finding out about the farmgate robbery and was therefore killed.

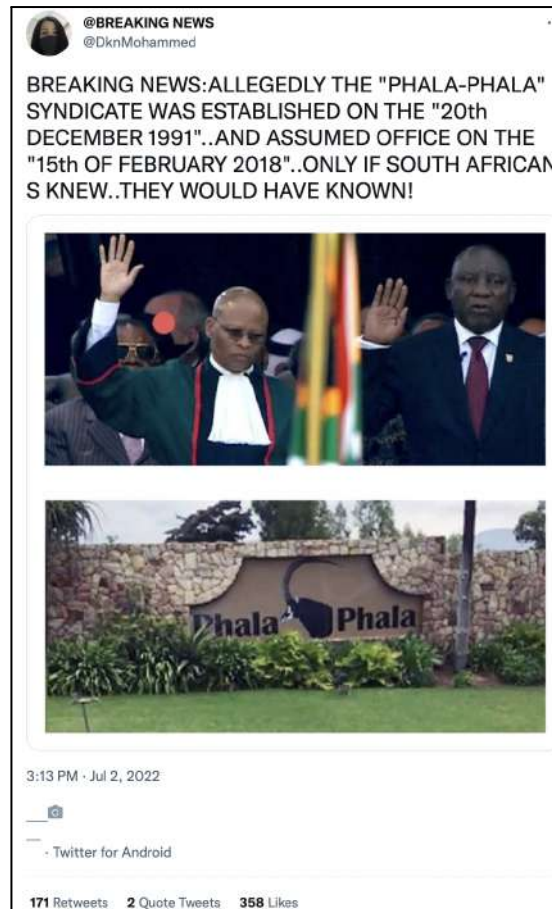
The @DknMohammed account has been very instrumental in spreading and creating online “breaking news: allegedly” around a number of topics, including the Phala-Phala farm robbery. The account, with a Twitter bio that states “EDITOR IN CHIEF-TWITTER NEWSROOM” was created in March 2018, and is influential with more than 20k followers. As shown later in this report, figure 6, this account also forms part of the list of the most mentioned tweeters within the conversation.

The account’s posts are a mixture of content that coincides with news media reports; and content or “[allegations](#)” that - as in the above-mentioned examples - contains information that appears to be unverified, with no source attribution. .

This technique, where the author keeps the identity of the alleged source of information anonymous, the operator restricts the ability for others to critically evaluate and confirm the claim, is known as corroborated anonymous sourcing.

According to the [Media Manipulation Casebook](#), while “professional news media organizations usually disclose named sources and apply strict guidelines when and if they attribute news and information to anonymous sources”, campaign operators “exploit this practice by using uncorroborated sources to cover a lack of evidence supporting their campaign, to push a narrative, and/or to make it seem as if they have special access to secret or guarded information”.

Examples of the “breaking news” shared by the @DknMohammed:



- 11 - 13 July 2022: Online conversation around plans to [march](#) to Luthuli House on 15 July. The CABC also detected similarities in the posts between some Twitter users who wanted to keep the Phala Phala at the top of the trending lists. This technique, where any block of text is “repeatedly reposted, often on social media, messaging apps, online discussion forums, and comments sections”, is referred to as copy-paste by the [Media Manipulation Casebook](#).



Abuti Mampela
@mamphela24

Listen don't be distracted ,we are still here :
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#) [#GlencoreCorruption](#)
[#BringBackMkhwebane](#) [#RamaphosaMustGo](#)
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#) [#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#)
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#) [#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#)
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#) [#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#)
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#)

7:29 PM · Jul 11, 2022



Twitter for Android

3 Retweets 3 Likes

...



MamaWinnie Jr
@Dimpho_Mokwala

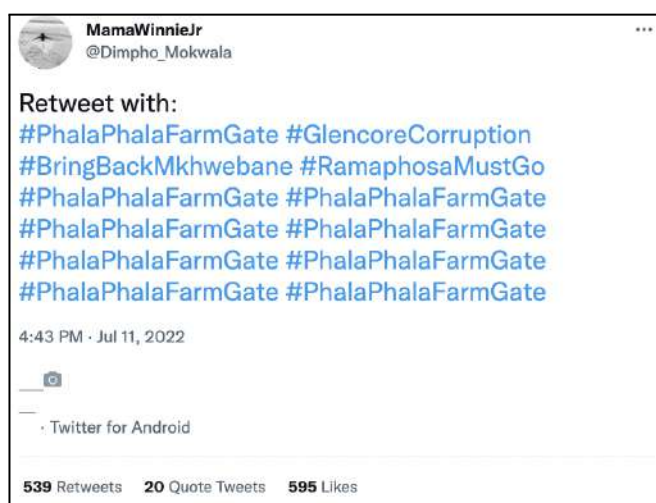
Listen don't be distracted ,we are still here :
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#) [#GlencoreCorruption](#)
[#BringBackMkhwebane](#) [#RamaphosaMustGo](#)
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#) [#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#)
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#) [#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#)
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#) [#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#)
[#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#)

4:21 PM · Jul 11, 2022



Twitter for Android

466 Retweets 14 Quote Tweets 771 Likes



- 15 July 2022: Day of the [march](#) to Luthuli House. Online posters show that the aim of the march was to call for the immediate suspension of President Cyril Ramaphosa, the implementation of a living wage and for the immediate end to loadshedding. According to media [reports](#), the march was led by suspended ANC member and a supporter of former president Jacob Zuma supporter, Carl Niehaus.
- 20 July 2022: Lead-up to ANC KZN elective conference. Some social media users are pushing for Ramaphosa to answer questions about the farmgate robbery.
- 24 July 2022: Last day of ANC KZN elective conference. This was the day when President Cyril Ramaphosa [addressed](#) delegates.
- 29 July 2022: Online conversations centred around reports that President Cyril Ramaphosa appeared before the [ANC integrity committee meeting](#) on 28 July, but refused to answer questions related to the Phala Phala scandal.

- 31 July 2022: Reports that ANC KZN Premier was planning to resign, “[after losing the contest for ANC provincial chairperson](#)” during the party’s elective conference. ANC Nasrec conference gets under way.



- 3 August 2022: “The [Forum](#) of Opposition Parties represented in Parliament meets to discuss, ensuring that Ramaphosa accounts for #PhalaPhalaFarmGate”.
- 5 August 2022: Farmgate robbery and Ramaphosa’s competency to hold office are dragged into the Krugersdorp rape incident, which was reported in July. Speaking at the Presidential Social Sector Summit in Boksburg, [Ramaphosa](#) called on law enforcement to “double their efforts in catching those responsible for the heinous crime of gang-raping the young women”.
- 10 August 2022: A number of Twitter accounts using #PhalaPhalaFarmgate criticised this News24 [article](#), accusing the publication of “significantly [understating](#) the amount stolen at Cyril Ramaphosa's #PhalaPhalaFarmGate”.



- 17 August 2022: Opposition parties brief the [media](#) on their plans to hold President Cyril Ramaphosa accountable for the alleged cover-up of a robbery at his game farm. These parties include DA, EFF, IFP, ACDP, UDM, NFP, ATM, COPE and the PAC.
- 23 August 2022: Slight peak of just above 3000 mentions, with the below posts from @JGZ_Foundation and @54Battalion being the most retweeted.



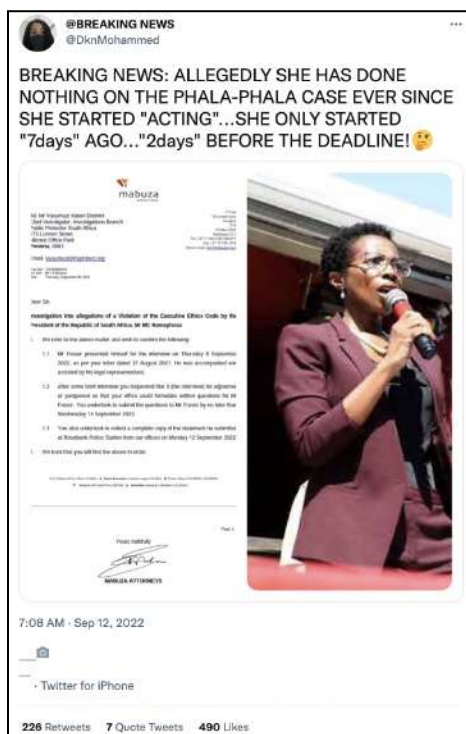
- 30 August 2022: Posters of a picket outside the Public Protector's office, scheduled to take place on 9 September, are circulated online. According to a [post](#) by @EFFSouthAfrica, "The Acting Public Protector is in breach of the Executive Members Ethics Act, by failing to release the Report on Phala Phala Farm within 30 days of the initial complaint". President Cyril Ramaphosa [refuses](#) to answer Phala Phala related questions during a sitting of parliament.
- 6 September 2022: More than 8000 mentions behind this peak.



- 9 September 2022: Opposition parties' picket outside the Public Protector's office. President Ramaphosa's suspension of Public Protector Busisiwe Mkhwebane is set aside by the Western Cape High Court.



- 12 September 2022: Online conversations centred around acting Public Protector Kholeka Gcaleka and what she has/has not done on the Phala Phala case since taking over the role.



Appendix B

Top 10 hashtags within the Phala Phala conversation, as well as the two most retweeted posts within each hashtag.

1. #phalaphalafarmgate



2. #ramaphosamustgo



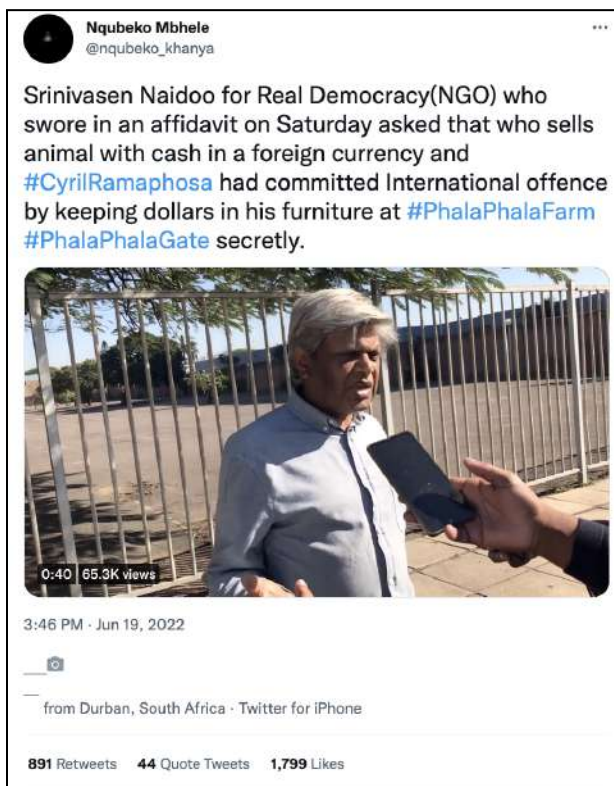
3. #phalaphalagate



4. #phalaphalagatefarm



5. #phalaphalafarm



6. #cyrilmustresign



7. #cr17bankstatements



8. #cyrilramaphosamustgo

Kim Heller
@kimheller3

I said it two years ago - Cyril Ramaphosa is disposable and easily replaceable

White media can no longer defend him

#phalaphala #PhalaPhalaFarmGate
#CyrilRamaphosamustgo #CyrilMustGo

Motsamai Mokona
@motsamai247

CIC Julius Malema once said: "Protect protect him at your own peril" ...and look at where we are now
#PhalaPhalaFarmGate #CyrilRamaphosamustgo



0:44 46K views

12:16 PM · Jul 1, 2022

Twitter Web App

819 Retweets 30 Quote Tweets 1,726 Likes



Kim Heller on Black Leaders & White Power.
Cyril vs Zuma.

1:50 28K views

11:40 AM · Jul 3, 2022

Twitter for iPhone

783 Retweets 55 Quote Tweets 1,637 Likes

9. #farmgate

Adv Busisiwe Mkhwebane
@AdvBMkhwebane

Do not be deflected #glencore and #farmgate aluta continua

5:42 PM · Jun 9, 2022

Twitter for iPhone

1,751 Retweets 241 Quote Tweets 4,578 Likes

Dali Mpofu
@AdvDali_Mpofu

So a certain Mr Smith who is the person running the animal auctions at #PhalaPhalagate #FarmGate including the one of this coming Saturday has told the media that they do NOT take cash (even in rands) but they only work in electronic transfers!!

Lies indeed have short legs!!

8:21 AM · Jun 15, 2022

Twitter for iPhone

1,440 Retweets 61 Quote Tweets 3,607 Likes

10. #nationalshutdown

Izwe Lethu
@LandNoli

Pravin Must Go!!
Pravin amust Go!!

Pravin Gordhan was delivering a lecture at Wits on reforming SOEs [#PhalaPhalaGateFarm](#)
[#NationalShutdown](#)



0:24 120.9K views

8:19 PM · Jul 7, 2022

· Twitter for Android

1,272 Retweets 185 Quote Tweets 2,873 Likes

Mr.RightNow
@kg007man

[#EnyobeniTavern](#) alcoholics will receive a free mass funeral while kids who drowned crossing a river to school are left to be buried by their families

[#NationalShutdown](#) SK Khoza Lerato kganyago royal am [#PhalaPhalaGate](#) [#EnoughIsEnough](#)

7:48 AM · Jul 6, 2022

· Twitter Web App

1,107 Retweets 85 Quote Tweets 5,049 Likes