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From RET to MK Party:
The mobilisation of existing
Twitter/X communities to drive
political messaging

Disclosure: 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

Social Networking Sites (SNS's) offer a new form of political expression that must be distinguished from traditional participation in the political landscape[1]. Individuals on social media who show high levels of activity with regards to news and political information have the potential to influence and shape the political behaviour of their online networks[2]. Online social influence is so powerful that it can impact important factors such as the media outlets people choose to consume their news and whether or not they will vote[3]. The use of online political messages was found to be so powerful that not only did it influence the people to whom messages were delivered, but also their friends and friends of friends[4].

In the build-up to the 2024 National elections in South Africa, many researchers and journalists have been tracking the campaigns of political parties across social media platforms. X.com (formerly Twitter) presents a particularly interesting and easy-to-analyse platform given the volume of political activity it hosts and the data accessibility it offers to analytics tools. One particular party that has stood out in recent months because of their online presence is the newly formed uMkhonto weSizwe Party (MK Party). Spearheaded by Jacob Zuma, the former president of South Africa and the African National Congress (the ANC), the popularity of the MK Party was detected by researchers at the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) who track instances of online narrative manipulation, as usage of MK Party-specific hashtags appeared in large volumes overnight[5]. This led to the formulation of the following research questions: (1) How did a newly formed political party gain popularity so quickly when little canvassing had been done between its formation and the rise in hashtag trends?, and (2) How authentic is the rise of the MK Party's online presence?

With these questions in mind, the CABC engaged Murmur to provide an in-depth analysis of all South African political communities that they have been tracking so that the rapid rise in MK Party presence on X.com could be comparatively assessed. Based on that analysis, this report describes how the MK Party appears to have mobilised the network and influence of an existing online community. In 2021, the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change analysed a network of at least

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[1] A New Space for Political Behavior: Political Social Networking and its Democratic Consequences (Bode et al, 2014); doi:10.1111/jcc4.12048

[2] Online Influence? Social Media Use, Opinion Leadership, and Political Persuasion. (Weeks et al, 2017); doi:10.1093/ijpor/edv050

[3] A 61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilization (Jones et al, 2012); DOI: 10.1038/nature11421

[4] Ibid.

[5] Jacob Zuma was the lead candidate and face of the MK party until recently when the founder, Jabulani Khumalo suspended him from the party - https://www.news24.com/news24/politics/political-parties/face-vs-founder-mk-party-implodes-as-expelled-khumalo-suspends-consultant-zuma-20240507

50 X.com accounts who formed part of the ANC's Radical Economic Transformation Forces (RET) faction[6]. The online 'RET forces' drove very different narratives from those purporting to be defenders of 'the ANC of Ramaphosa'. This is important in light of the need for the citizenry to be aware of how online support for the MK Party has gained momentum quickly and made a large impact.

Research Methodology

For many years, researchers at Murmur have been using Social Network Analysis to group X.com users into communities. These communities are defined by patterns of interactions, where a community is formed if there are more connections within it than between it and another account or group of accounts. In Figure 1 below, an interaction network is shown to highlight the communities discussing South African politics analysed in this report. Users are connected to each other when they interact with each other on X.com. The colours represent distinct communities and the size of each node indicates the influence of that account. Please note that @AdvoBarryRoux's account has been suspended since this data was collected.
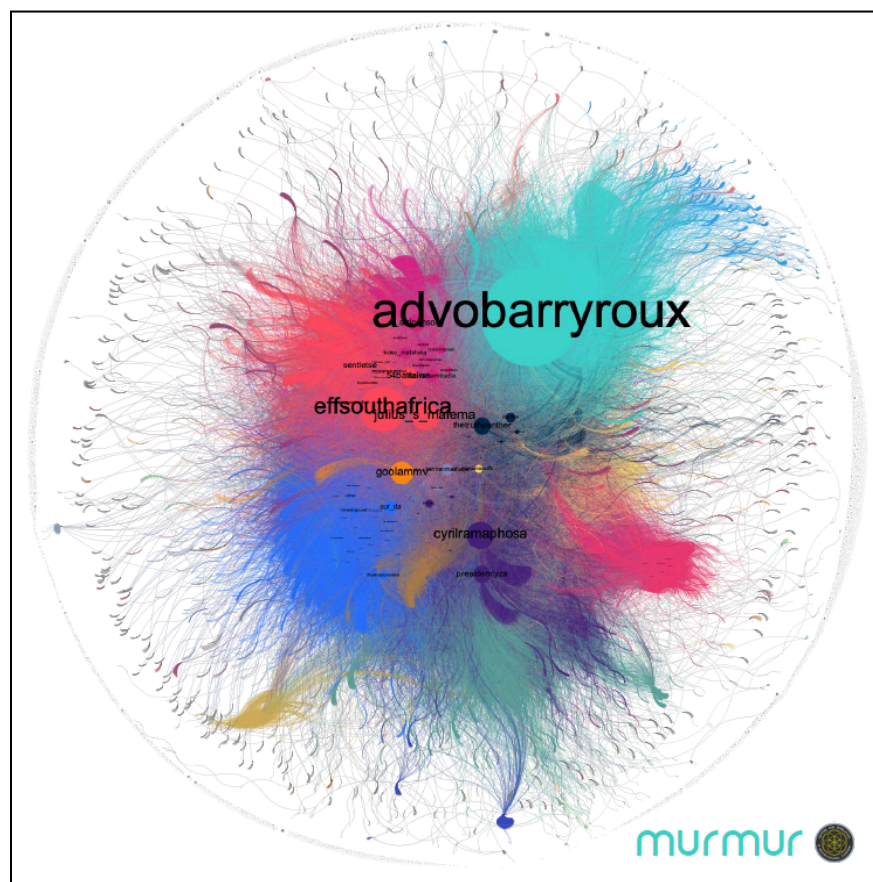

Figure 1: Interaction network of the communities analysed in this report.

[6] https://cabc.org.za/democracy-reports/

The need for such observation into online communities arose when it was discovered that allied private sector and political interests of Jacob Zuma procured the services of UK-based PR firm, Bell Pottinger, to mount a racially divisive campaign that sought to legitimise the programme of radical economic transformation and state capture in South Africa. This campaign helped politicians in South Africa, specifically the Jacob Zuma-faction of the ANC and the Gupta Brothers, to frame a campaign that was designed to deflect attention away from that faction's alleged misdeeds and attempts to destabilise the economy. The campaign was likely run by a Gupta-linked team based in India through the use of fake personas, or 'sockpuppet' accounts[7], known as the "Guptabots"[8]. Through this campaign, which ran in 2016, terms like "White Monopoly Capital" and "Radical Economic Transformation" (RET) were amplified online in an inauthentic manner in an attempt to create fear among the citizenry. The term "Radical Economic Transformation" had its roots in an ANC plan to accelerate the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP)[9]. Based on the content that was driven by a cluster of accounts on social media called the "RET group", it quickly became used to denote such activities as land reclamation without compensation. This group, led by pseudo-anonymous accounts, appeared online shortly after the Guptabots were turned off after the RET faction's loss at the ANC54 elective conference at the end of 2017[10]. In the intervening six years, it has worked to position itself at the centre of South Africa's political debates on X.com[11]. The content that was, and is, being driven by this group will be assessed later in this report.

In each community that has been established, there are accounts known as "core accounts", which persist over time and define that community's narratives. These core accounts are determined based on their centrality to a particular conversation as a result of the number of interactions they have with other accounts in the community. Being part of a community does not mean that an account agrees with that community. However, if, for example, a community member does not align on approximately 50% of the topics within a community, their interactions would pull them towards another community where their contribution is engaged with to a greater extent. As the saying goes, "birds of a feather flock together". Based on the longitudinal tracking of the behaviour of these online communities, the error rate in classifying them and grouping accounts within them is low.

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[7] https://www.superlinear.co.za/running-interference-the-fake-white-monopoly-capital-propaganda-community-on-twitter

[8] The term "Guptabots" refers to accounts first seen in mid-2016 that pretended to be South Africans. In reality, these accounts were mostly being coordinated from India to drive the real world political agenda of the notorious Gupta family in South Africa

[9] https://www.businesslive.co.za/rdm/politics/2017-06-27-cyril-ramaphosa-radical-economic-transformation-let-me-explain-

[10] https://www.superlinear.co.za/hope-and-propaganda-at-the-anc54-elective-conference/

[11] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629822002220

Considering the centrality of the core accounts in any community, it is expected that the membership will remain stable i.e. it is very rare that an account that is labelled core to a community will be pulled into another online community, especially if the interactions of such accounts are authentic. From what has been observed through the dataset evaluated in this report, opinions, ideologies and political stances do not change overnight without a major disruption or event taking place.

We expect noise on the edges of communities, but a clear signal in the centre. This is due to a mechanism called 'preferential attachment' (also known under many other terms such as the Rich-Getting-Richer Effect, Pareto Principle, Cumulative Advantage, Double Jeopardy Effect or the Matthew Effect[12]). Phenomena such as the Matthew Effect may largely be explained by preferential attachment, whereby wealth or credit is distributed among individuals according to how much they already have[13]. This has the net effect of making it increasingly difficult for low ranked individuals to increase their totals because they have fewer resources to risk over time, and increasingly easy for high ranked individuals to preserve a large total because they have a large amount to risk. This effect carries over to follower numbers and interactions on social networks.

Given this inherent stability, this report evaluated the unexpected movement of core accounts over 2 periods: between 01 November and 10 December 2023, which is referred to as "Wave 1", and between 11 December 2023 and 31 March 2024, referred to as "Wave 2". The reason for ranking accounts was to understand the more stable, central, 'core' accounts. A stable core goes a long way towards defining the identity of the community. When there are new entrants from another community, it is a noteworthy signal. The same applies when a central account leaves. 'New entrants' are those that were not observed before but suddenly appear in the core among other 'stable core' accounts. It is an important signal of the rebranding attempts that will be explained in detail below.

Analysing communities in this way, it was noted that a new community was rapidly formed in December 2023. The newly formed community, the "MK Party community", appeared to have an immediate surge in interactions and engagement online, backed by a large number of followers. For anyone who has created a social media account, they would know that growing engagement and followers organically is not a quick nor straightforward task. Therefore, to understand how the interactions of a new community grew so rapidly, researchers analysed the 30 most central core accounts in each community illustrated in Figure 1, before and after the formation of the new

[12] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09298215.2017.1358285; https://www.jstor.org/stable/43563299; https://www.jstor.org/stable/26634997

[13] Preferential Attachment in Social Media The Case of Nico Nico Douga; Johannes Putzke and Hideaki Takeda (2018)

community. The goal was to understand if the stable, hard-to-shift core of any existing community had been pulled into the MK Party community, which would suggest that an existing formation online had been mobilised and repurposed to meet the needs of a new political party formation.

Establishing this shift in the core of a community would then provide a basis for deeper exploration of the content being driven by those accounts to understand authenticity and political alignment; all information that would be useful to clarify for the general South African population so that they are not inauthentically influenced by "prosumers"[14] ahead of the elections.

Movement of the core accounts

An initial review of the top 30 core accounts in each community showed that 10 accounts core to the RET community before 10 December 2024 moved into the MK Party community after that date. This is the benchmark date that is used through the analysis as it represents the day the MK Party announced their formation. These 10 X.com handles are listed below:

@_AfricanSoil
@koko_matshela
@KhandaniM
@LandNoli
@ZungulaVuyo
@SuperiorZulu
@ATMovement_SA
@mrlungisa
@ThaboMakwakwa
@Gentlements

This by no means suggests any collusion taking place between these specific accounts. They have all landed in this community because of the common interactions they share with regards to driving anti-Ramaphosa- or anti-Zondo Commission-type content (examples of the content driven by these accounts are expanded upon below). There are heightened interactions between these accounts based on the content that they drive, and they are therefore placed in the same community automatically according to the community detection algorithm used. This clarification is important to make, specifically with respect to accounts like that of Member of Parliament, Zungula Vuyo, who is

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[14] "Prosumers" consider themselves to be opinion leaders in their social networks, and this perception is represented as attempting to persuade others about politics, which they have the potential to do based on their interactions (Weeks et al, 2015).

also president of the African Transformation Movement (ATM) party and who has denied that his party has any link with Jacob Zuma[15].

In Figure 2 below, a heatmap is shown that displays the percentage of accounts that moved between communities across the South African political landscape between Wave 1 and Wave 2.
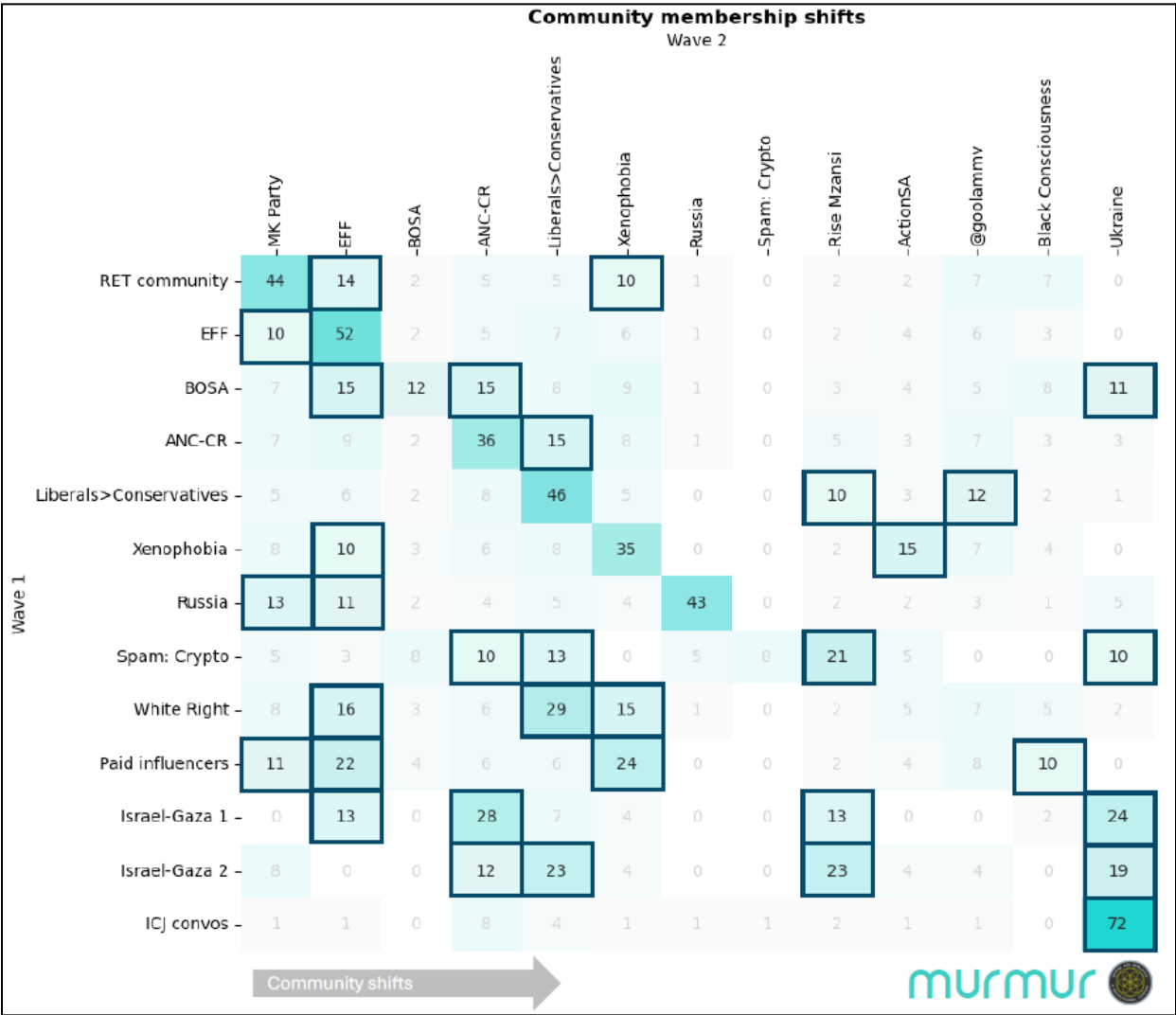

Wave 1 \ Wave 2	MK Party	EFF	BOSA	ANC-CR	Liberals>Conservatives	Xenophobia	Russia	Spam: Crypto	Rise Mzansi	ActionSA	@goolammv	Black Consciousness	Ukraine
RET community	44	14	2	5	5	10	1	0	2	2	7	7	0
EFF	10	52	2	5	7	6	1	0	2	4	6	3	0
BOSA	7	15	12	15	8	9	1	0	3	4	5	8	11
ANC-CR	7	9	2	36	15	8	1	0	5	3	7	3	3
Liberals>Conservatives	5	6	2	8	46	5	0	0	10	3	12	2	1
Xenophobia	8	10	3	6	8	35	0	0	2	15	7	4	0
Russia	13	11	2	4	5	4	43	0	2	2	3	1	5
Spam: Crypto	5	3	8	10	13	0	5	8	21	5	0	0	10
White Right	8	16	3	6	29	15	1	0	2	5	7	5	2
Paid influencers	11	22	4	6	6	24	0	0	2	4	8	10	0
Israel-Gaza 1	0	13	0	28	7	4	0	0	13	0	0	2	24
Israel-Gaza 2	8	0	0	12	23	4	0	0	23	4	4	0	19
ICJ convos	1	1	0	8	4	1	1	1	2	1	1	0	72

Community shifts

Figure 2: This heatmap shows X user shifts between communities before (Wave 1) and after (Wave 2) 10 December 2023.

The number of accounts that remain in a community is >30% for the top 5 communities. This might seem low, but the dataset covers many topic shifts between November 2023 and March 2024. Therefore, the chance of accounts swarming together arbitrarily is extremely low. If it was random,

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[15] https://twitter.com/eliotchauke1/status/1737076778236072021 and
https://twitter.com/TheCitizen_News/status/1765803142401171887 are sample posts showing the distance that the ATM Party has put between itself and the MK party.

we would see accounts flocking to any of over 500 detected communities. However, in the case of the observed accounts, they moved between one of 12 communities. What the graph shows us for example is that before and after 10 December 2023, 46% of the accounts in the "Liberal>Conservatives" community (this community contains a broad spectrum of users from progressives and liberals to libertarians and conservatives) remained the same. For the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), 52% of accounts remained the same between the two time intervals. With the RET grouping on the chart, 44% of the community accounts moved into another community i.e. the MK Party community. This is at least four times higher than the movement of the RET grouping to any other political community during the assessment period and is in line with the level of stability we see in other communities.

Digital floor crossing

Other large and interesting data points from Figure 2 above indicate that after 10 December 2023, 15% of accounts that were members of the ANC-CR community (which includes such accounts as the President's official X.com handle) moved into the Liberal>Conservatives community. For the Rise Mzansi community, 10% of the accounts came from the Liberal>Conservatives community.

Having analysed the top 30 core accounts and the broad community, it was decided to assess the core accounts in a stricter way i.e. by analysing the top 5 core accounts in each community. This is because reaching the top 5 in a community is more difficult than finding a place in the top 30. Therefore, it is expected that the top 5 will be even more stable than the top 30 as each step up in rank is exponentially more difficult to reach than the previous position (due to the Matthew Effect). Examples of these core accounts that crossed in and out of the political party communities are shown in Figure 3 below.

		RET/MK Party	BOSA	ActionSA	EFF	Rise Mzansi
●	Consistent Core	@_africansoil @Koko_matshela @zungulavuyo	@Mmusimaimane @buildonesa	@Hermanmashaba @Action4sa @atholt	@Effsouthafrica @julius_s_malema	@Rise_mzansi @Andimakinana @songezozibi
→	Crossed In	@Dzumasambudla @presjgzuma	None	None	@Newzroom405 @niehaus_carl	None
←	Crossed Out	@niehaus_carl	None	None	None	None
⇢	New entrants	@mkhontowesizwex	@ayandaallie	None	None	@Change_nowza @rogerjardineza

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The "Consistent Core" refers to the top 5 members of a community who have remained within the same community from Wave 1 to Wave 2. These members are not just present in both periods but also maintain their position within the top 5 ranks (based on a centrality metric).

"Crossed In" refers to the top 10 members who have entered the community from outside and have risen to a top rank within the new community. The filtering for this group involves selecting members who were not part of the community in the first time period but are present in the second. These accounts are then filtered to include only those who are within the top 10 ranks in the new community.

"Crossed Out" refers to the top 10 members who have moved out of the community to another and have become top-ranked in their new community. The filtering for this group involves selecting members who were part of the community in the first time period but are in a different community in the second. These accounts are then filtered to include only those who were within the top 10 ranks in the original community before they left.

"New Entrants" refers to the top 10 new members who were not part of any community in the first time period and have become top-ranked members in the second period. The filtering for this group involves selecting new members to the community in the second time period. These accounts are then filtered to include only those who are within the top 10 ranks in the community.

These movements have been labelled as "digital floor crossing" for the purpose of this report. In 2002, South Africa adopted the system of "floor crossing" with regards to parliamentary seats. It enables a member of parliament to move to another party or form their own party and still retain their seats during a window period. What the movements from Table 1 indicate is that members of political communities online appear to be able to switch allegiances whenever it suits them. This is important to take note of because when they switch communities, they take their network and sphere of influence along with them.

Content driven by the core accounts pre- and post-formation of the MK Party community

In 2021, the CABC conducted a network analysis of 50 accounts that generated and amplified pro-Zuma messaging that defended corruption-linked officials including former president Jacob Zuma, while discrediting the leadership of President Cyril Ramaphosa. Among these were @_AfricanSoil (who played a content generation role in the network), and @Landnoli and @Gentlements (who both reposted and amplified content within the network).

Prior to former president Jacob Zuma's announcement that he would be backing the MK Party in the upcoming elections, the 10 accounts predominantly engaged in topics around Rand currency manipulation, the Phala Phala Farm Scandal (#PhalaPhalaFarmgate), divisive racial issues, and calls for President Ramaphosa to disclose his bank statements from 2017 (#CR17BankStatements). Examples of posts shared by some of these accounts can be found in Figure 4 below.
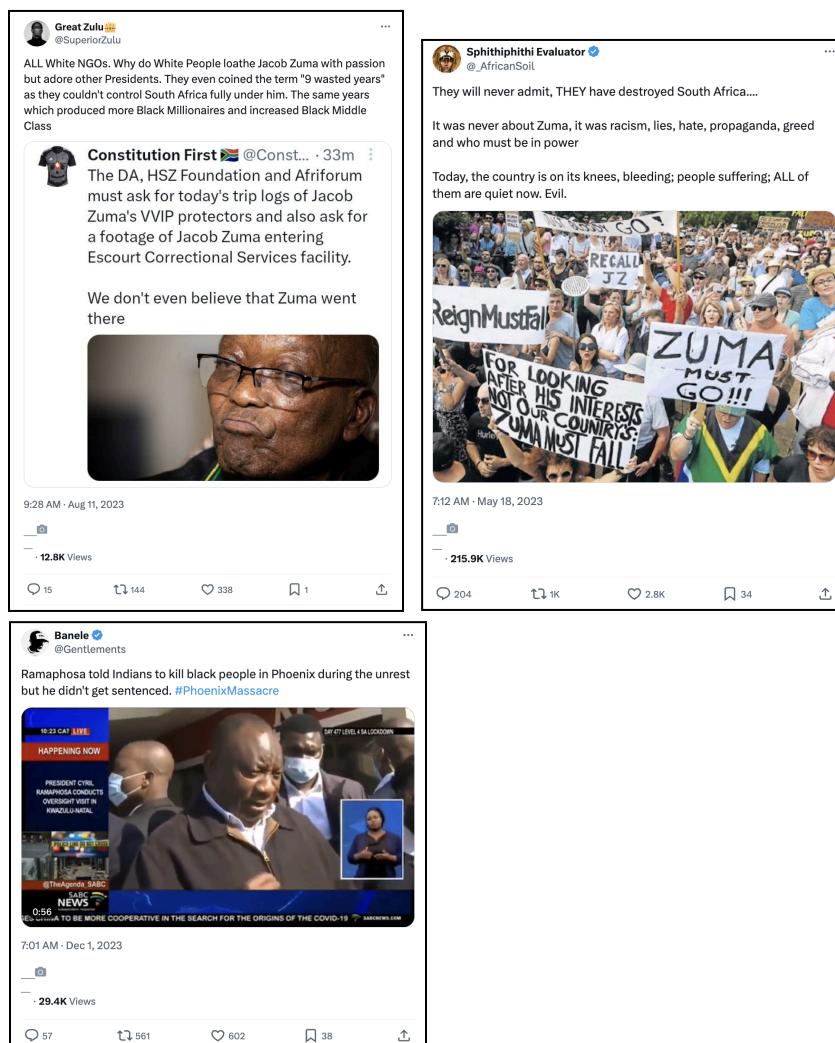

Fig. 4: Example posts from "RET community accounts" between 1 April and 15 December 2023

Figure 5 below shows the type of content posted by the same accounts after the launch of the MK Party. The anti-Ramaphosa, pro-Zuma messaging remained the same.
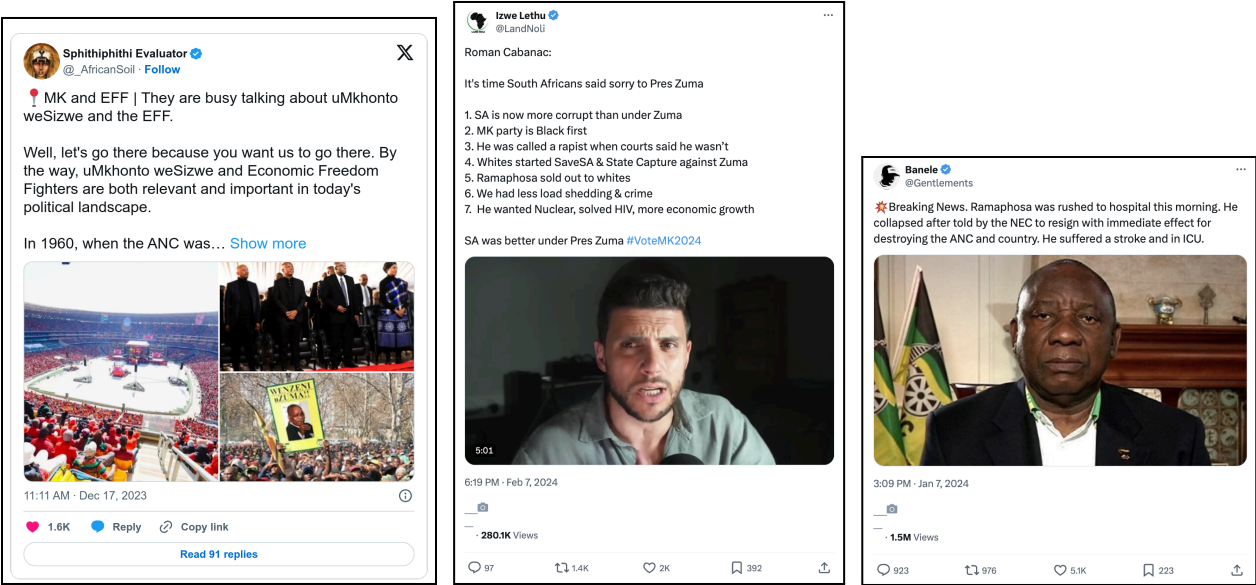

Figure 5: Example posts from "MK accounts" between 16 December and 30 April 2024

The surprising level of sudden interest that the former RET community has shown in the MK Party raised further flags for researchers because of the topics they focus on. One expects that political campaigning would focus on how the political party, if elected will improve the living conditions of all South Africans through health, access to transport, education, policing, and other socio-economic factors. However, in Figure 6 below, a list of topics shows that since 10 December 2023, the main topic that this group focuses on is criticism of President Cyril Ramaphosa and the ANC under his leadership, and not the socio-economic concerns that would impact the electorate.
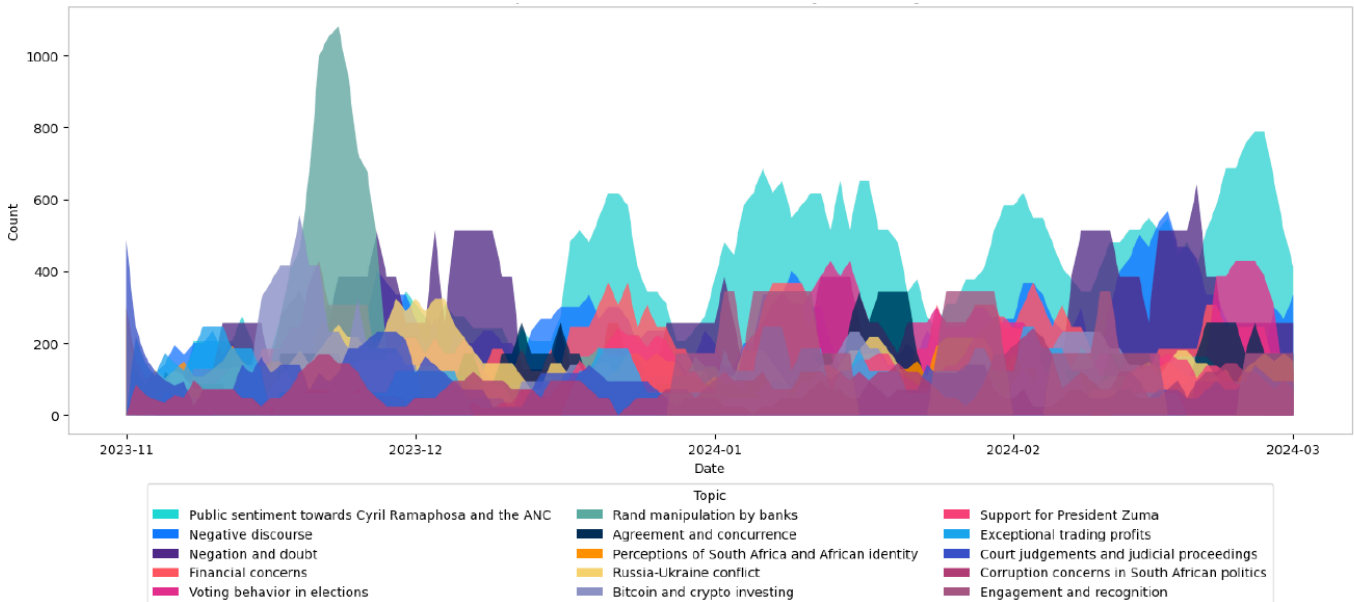
The second topic that they mostly focused on was labelled "negation and doubt", further illustrating that the online group that is driving MK Party content spends more time sowing doubt about their political rivals and the South African political system amongst its community members than speaking to South Africans' socio-economic concerns.

Hashtag flip

Before the launch of the MK Party, the RET faction engaged in content favourable to the EFF. Amongst the popular hashtags used in their posts were #RegistertoVoteEFF and #2024isOur1994 (a hashtag which originally served as a slogan to Rise Mzansi's 2024 election campaign before being co-opted by the EFF). As illustrated in Figure 7 below, the use of the above hashtags declined very quickly after the launch of the MK Party, accompanied by a dramatic increase in the use of #VoteMK2024 from 19 December 2023. This indicates a significant shift in emphasis in the messaging by the same group of accounts.
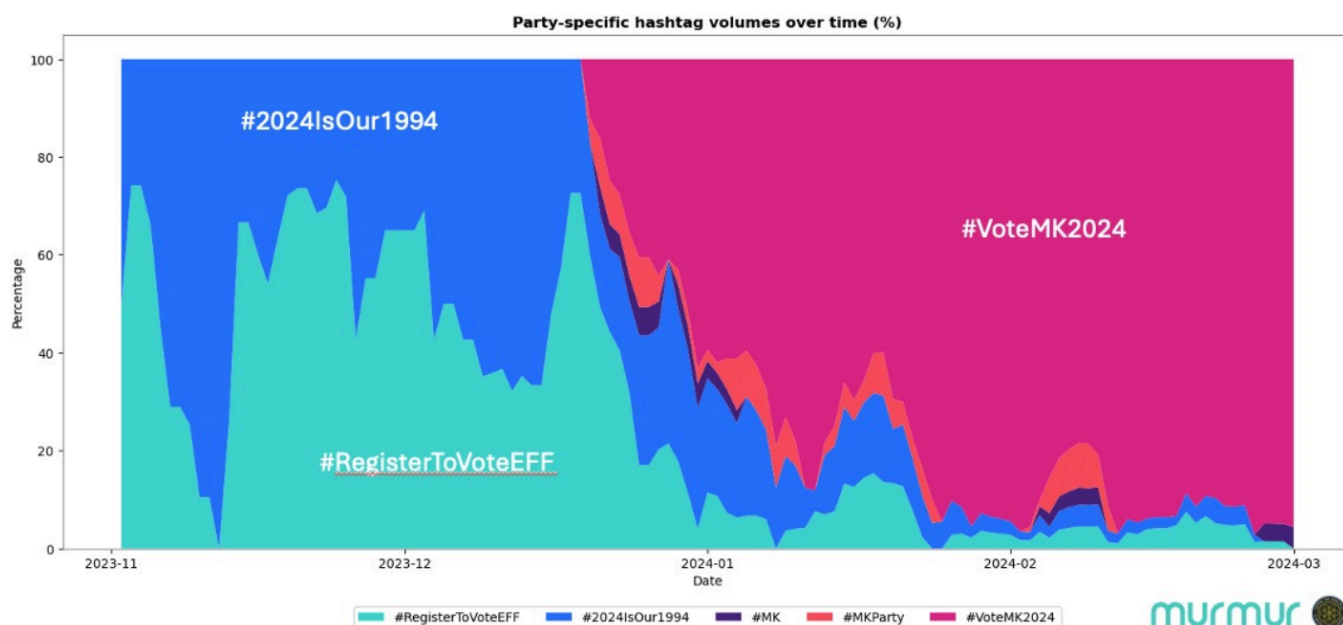

Figure 7: Graph showing that the RET/MK Party community switched in mid-December 2023 from driving EFF hashtags to driving the hashtag of the MK Party (i.e. #VoteMK2024)

Suspicions of reconciliation between Jacob Zuma and EFF leader, Julius Malema (who once led a nation-wide #ZumaMustFall campaign), surfaced when the EFF leader visited Zuma in his Nkandla

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[16] The topics have been labelled using AI technology based on semantic keyword clustering

homestead for "tea" in 2021[17]. The contents of their meeting were concealed from the public; however, Zuma's online supporters have shown alignment with messaging that is pro-EFF.

Earlier this year, however, Malema accused[18] Zuma of being in denial if he thinks he can rescue the ANC, which is "dead". What does it say about the relationship between these two parties when a community willing to push EFF hashtags one week flips to MK Party hashtags the next? Why didn't the EFF try to stimulate this group of people to keep driving their hashtag alongside that of the MK Party? Inconsistencies like this hint at the possibility that (1) the EFF were not aware of a significant loss of members in their online community, (2) the likelihood of a coalition between the EFF and MK Party is high, and/or (3) the EFF were a satisficing choice for this community and, when presented with a preferred option, they jumped ship, never to look back. An analysis of #2024isOur1994 and #RegistertoVoteEFF shows that these hashtags were predominantly amplified by anonymous accounts, @Gentlements and @LandNoli. These accounts predominantly reposted content from other accounts, amplifying the messaging associated with the two hashtags.

So, what exactly is the problem and why?

The MK Party appears to have mobilised by wholesale co-opting a community that has existed for years; a community defined by anonymous accounts who rose to prominence in the wake of the Guptabots, and whose key members have been accused, although acquitted due to lack of evidence, of supporting violent civil unrest (the 2021 July Unrest, where over 300 South Africans were killed), and of having links to geo-political players known to meddle in other countries' social media landscapes and elections, such as Russia. This raises red flags around issues of authenticity.

An existing community already has a large network and sphere of influence. @_AfricanSoil, for example, already had more than 160 000 followers on X.com at the time that they started to drive MK Party-aligned content. @koko_matshela (former Eskom CEO) has more than 147 000 followers at present. This creates an opportunity for their content to be seen by a vast network of online users, which in turn increases the chances of their messaging impacting South Africa's public discourse; which is fine, if the messaging is authentic and created in good faith.

Consider, for example, a conspiratorial post by @_AfricanSoil shown in Figure 8 below, which shows the headlines from a newspaper called "The Irish Light" that drives a strong anti-vaccine message. It is important to note that "The Irish Light" was sued for spreading vaccine misinformation[19]; however, @_AfricanSoil's influence is so vast - and may even be inauthentically amplified - that the post received

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[17] LETTERS TO THE EDITOR | Tea with Zuma: Malema's intentions are clear
[18] 'Zuma in denial if he thinks his MK Party support will rescue ANC': Malema
[19] The Irish Light: Woman abused by paper which falsely said vaccine killed her son

close to 500 000 views and was reposted more than 1 600 times. Hence, retrospective actions to mitigate against the spread of disinformation such as fact checking, while important, do little to mitigate against its spread in real-time except for its deterrent value.

Figure 8: Post by @_AfricanSoil that shares information from a paper that has been sued for spreading misinformation

Alongside anti-vaccine conspiracy content sits a post by the same account that quotes Zuma as he encourages people to vote for the MK Party (see Figure 9 below). The image along with Zuma's message received more than 183 000 views from this post alone along with 3 369 likes at the time of publishing.

Without the assistance of this account, it is questionable whether such pro-MK Party content could have appeared as popular as it did on X.com.

Figure 9: Example of a pro-MK Party post made by the same account shown to post information from problematic news sources

In addition to this, the account that created these mentions is known to post frequently on a variety of political topics. During the reporting period it was noted that on 3 February 2024 alone, the account created 125 posts. This single-minded focus on posting raises the question of whether or not the account is receiving financial aid for their daily contributions. If so, should such benefits be disclosed to the public much like party funding is made public or how paid influencers are required to disclose that they are advertising products they endorse (for example, through the inclusion of "#Ad" in posts, which is done to ensure that the public are aware that an influencer may only be promoting a certain product because they are being paid to do so and not because they genuinely make use of, and believe in, the benefits of the product)?

When it comes to backing political candidates and parties, authentic communications and clear statements of financial gain should be equally, if not more, important than when advertising a product or a service given the potential to influence election outcomes. This is why it is important to make sense of not only the movement of core accounts in these communities but also the content they are driving, prior political affiliations, and the authenticity of these accounts. It is both difficult to explain and understand

how it is that a group that was frequently making use of EFF hashtags, including one that was a call to register to vote for that party, could flip allegiances overnight and drive the campaign hashtag of another political formation, urging their same network to vote for another party. This behaviour also points to a need to further understand the extent of the relationship that exists between the EFF and the MK Party and what the implications of that relationship may be.

Lastly, political campaigning using anonymous accounts could arguably be problematic. As seen in Table 1, the consistent cores of ActionSA, BOSA, the EFF and Rise Mzansi all include either the X.com handle of the party's lead candidate or the official political party account. In accelerating the usage of MK Party slogans, this is the only party to have faceless, anonymous accounts as key, core players in amplifying its reach.

Conclusion

Political campaigning in South Africa has taken on a whole new set of features with the use of Social Networking Sites to mobilise existing networks of influence. They allow parties to rapidly present a face to the public that the party may be more popular and have more influence than they really do.

This report has demonstrated that the RET Community, which took over the mantle of the Guptabots, and was led by anonymous accounts, had a latent level of support for the EFF up until the MK Party was launched. At this point, the community switched wholesale over to promoting the MK Party.

The authenticity of online political representation is important to determine, particularly in the lead-up to elections. As was the case with Brexit in the UK and the 2016 US election of Donald Trump, online manipulation of public discourse can yield undesirable outcomes that negatively impact societies. This is particularly the case as social media, online media, and the platforms on which they operate represent a nascent, developing space that hosts public discourse that has varying degrees of authenticity, veracity and genuine representation. Hence, these spaces require closer attention from electoral bodies, civil society and other aligned organisations that seek to preserve the integrity of democratic institutions. This is even more important where democratic elections and electoral outcomes are concerned.

The authenticity of the MK Party mobilisation is of importance to understand because the stakes with this strategy are extremely high in that they have the potential to influence voting outcomes. As technology develops and prosumers find creative ways to influence public opinion, SNS's and governing bodies must work to understand the negative impact that such online influence has on voting outcomes and how such efforts to undermine democratic leadership election can be curbed.