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Digital IR | Working Paper Series

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Academic research into the field of digital international relations has grown in recent years, accompanied by the use of computational forms of analysis. The mining of big data from social media platforms to train algorithms that generate political content, for example, demonstrates the political impact of social media on wider political discourse.[1] The role of social media is particularly potent in the political landscape of South Africa, due to its history of discrimination and racial inequality. Here social media with its speed of instant communication has acted as an engine of activism, mobilisation and digital leverage,[2] as well as a conduit for channelling sensationalism and 'hate-filled froth'.[3] Of course, social media and politics are not strangers in the wider Southern African region. There have been multiple cases where the two have been utilised in various protests. Examples of these include: protests about public service delivery, #FeesMustFall in South Africa, the spread of the #RhodesMustFall movement from South Africa to the UK; digital activism around #ThisFlag which played a role in stimulating broader criticism of ZANUPF's track record in the twilight years of President Robert Mugabe;[4] and even the #41YearsLater hashtag currently trending on Twitter that seeks to spotlight current corruption and governance failings in Zimbabwe.[5] These examples suggest a model of social media-driven protest emergence, opinion coalescing, and activism. Such phenomenon are also spontaneous and organic, in which trending hashtags reflect and resonate with existing attitudes, grievances and frustration. However, a closer examination of the role of social media and issue of xenophobia in South Africa– which are also labelled as 'anti-foreigner' and 'Afrophobia' – highlights more complex interactions and covert manipulation. These dynamics, interest groups and their agenda have direct domestic implications for South Africa's social stability and development, as well as impacting on South Africa's relations with other African states.[6]

1   See Admire Mare, 'Social Media: The New Protest Drums in Southern Africa?', in Bogdan Patrut & Monica Patrut, (eds) S*ocial Media in Politics. Case Studies on the Political Power of Social Media*, (Springer International Publishing, Switzerland, 2014), pp. 315-335; Maggie Dwyer & Thomas Molony (eds), *Social Media and Politics in Africa: Democracy, Censorship and Security* (Zed Publishing, 2019)

2   Tanja Bosch, Herman Wasserman & Wallace Chuma, 'South African Activists' Use of Nanomedia and Digital Media in Democratization Conflicts, *International Journal of Communications 12* (2008).

3   James Myburg, The Two Weeks Hate and Tony Leon, https://www.biznews.com/thought-leaders/2021/04/14/racism-south-africa-ritual

4   Simbarashe Gukurume, '#ThisFlag and #ThisGown Cyber Protests in Zimbabwe: Reclaiming Political Space', *African Journal Studies,* Volume 38,2, 2017; Tenford Chitanana, 'From Kubatana to #ThisFlag: Trajectories of digital activism in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, Volume 17,2, 2020.

5   https://twitter-trends.iamrohit.in/south-africa

6   See https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/09/the-good-bad-and-ugly-tweets-on-xenophobic-attacks-on-nigeria-in-south-africa/ . President Ramaphosa was obliged to apologize publicly to President Muhammadu Buhari's government, following a storm of protest on Twitter in Nigeria and a spate of retaliatory attacks on South African businesses. https://twitter.com/mobilepunch/status/1173612779590377473 and https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49726041

Xenophobia has been a contentious issue in South African politics and society since transition to black majority rule.[7] Anti-foreigner feelings have accelerated particularly after the turn of the century, with notable eruption of violence in townships and informal settlements in 2008 and 2015.[8]

In March 2019, the South African government published its National Action Plan to Combat Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (NAP). The proposals intended to combat xenophobia include 'mechanisms to ensure foreigners receive services they are entitled to, facilitating their integration, and embracing a humane and dignified approach to managing migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers'.[9] Despite the government's formal adoption of the NAP, implementation has been 'anaemic'.[10] Within six months there was another wave of anti-foreigner violence in Johannesburg, in which African- and Asian-owned shops were ransacked.[11] Explanations offered for this renewed mob violence included socio-economic grievances, pressures regarding housing, high crime rates and poor/non-existent public services, leading to scapegoating of foreign migrant workers.[12] (South Africa currently has an unemployment rate of 36.98%[13], affecting a third of adults (even by official statistics) and one in two young people, with a consequent catastrophic impact on the lives of ordinary people.) The Human Science Research Council in 2019 pointed out that although there is little empirical evidence that immigrants drive crime or unemployment figures, a significant slice of the South African population hold anti-immigrant views.[14] Antipathy towards foreigners extends beyond spontaneous manifestations of violence in townships and informal settlements. Human Rights Watch recently published a report citing widespread instances of harassment, xenophobic rhetoric, serious injuries, forced displacement, as well as barriers to justice, education and access to health care, all of which are experienced by migrants and refugees. This demonisation of foreigners – characterised as xenophobia and 'Afrophobia' – is no longer limited to disillusioned adults but also extends to their children.[15] The brutal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated South Africa's pre-existing economic and financial problems; and several recent publications and reports have identified that xenophobia has reached a new level, and that perpetrators are acting with impunity.

To what extent is this trend in xenophobic attitudes and behaviour being facilitated by social media? Certainly, it is common sense to start from the premise that views expressed on social media do not exist in a vacuum and reflect and resonate with pre-existing attitudes. However, there is now disturbing evidence that social media is not simply reflecting wider social attitudes, discrimination and demonisation of foreigners, but that it has been expressly used to stimulate and drive anti-immigrant feeling.

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7   Southern Africa Migration Project Report 2004, https://media.africaportal.org/documents/Migration_Policy_Brief_No._17.pdf

8   In 2010 the South African Human Rights Commission published its detailed findings and extensive recommendations in their *Report on the SAHRC Investigation into Issues of Rule of Law, Justice and Impunity Arising Out of the 2008 Public Violence Against Non-Nationals*.

9   There are an estimated 2.2-3 million foreign born nationals in South Africa, including approximately 81,000 refugees. South Africa's 'free settlement' refugee/asylum policy has become increasingly restrictive, and a popular narrative has emerged (within the Department of Home Affairs, and UNHRC officials based in South Africa) that economic migrants have regularly abused the system. See N Maple, (unpublished PhD, 2021), 'A Precarious Welcome. The reception of refugees in Southern Africa.' Refugee Studies, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London.

10   Human Rights Watch Report, Xenophobic Violence against Non-Nationals, 17 September 2020. https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/09/17/they-have-robbed-me-my-life/xenophobic-violence-against-non-nationals-south

11   'Anti-foreigner violence' refers almost exclusively attacks against Africans and Asians. White foreigners have seldom been targeted.

12   These attacks prompted outrage elsewhere in Africa. The Nigerian government was particularly trenchant in its criticism of attacks targeting Nigerians living in South Africa, and there was retaliatory violence against South African businesses in Nigeria.

13   CEIC data, 2021, https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/south-africa/forecast-unemployment-rate#:~:text=South%20Africa%20Unemployment%20Rate%20is,of%2036.989%20%25%20in%20Dec%202020.

14   Human Science Research Council, 2019, https://qz.com/africa/1705349/how-south-africa-xenophobia-attacks-on-africans-is-driven/

15   'Xenophobia in South Africa', Human Rights Watch Report, 2021, World Report 2021: South Africa | Human Rights Watch (hrw.org)

At its core, social media is a complex, diverse and rapidly changing information landscape that spans the globe, and social media in South Africa is no different. The variety of social media platforms and the mediums they come in – whether they are mobile phone applications or internet-based websites, – underlines the speed with which social media has transformed the provision of news and opinion across the country. Trends which look set to accelerate as more and more South Africans access the highly competitive and rapidly expanding market: smart phones (particularly from China) are now cheaper, and new internet service providers are offering a wider range of less expensive packages. In addition, there is a trend for both public and private spaces offering free internet access. The statistics are startling: in a country with an official estimated population of 59.62m million,[16] over 36.54 million South Africans are internet users, of whom 34.93 million access the internet through their mobile phones.[17] By 2023, it is expected that this will increase by 40%. This impressive growth is a function of market demand, aggressive and competitive marketing, and a conscious policy by the ANC government to embrace the tech revolution.

South Africa has sizeable social media networks, as well as considerable internet penetration of the general population. 22m South Africans are currently social media users, nearly all of whom do so via mobile (21.56m). Top visited websites include Google, Facebook (reaching 45% of people over 13 years old), YouTube, Instagram (4 m), TikTok (6 m), and LinkedIn (7.6m). WhatsApp remains the most popular messaging platform, while there are over 2.8m Twitter users across South Africa.[18] This contrasts with the shrinking readership for legacy print media: recent statistics on the actual number of printed newspapers sold bear this out.[19] This represents tiny outreach in a population of 58m. As Martin Plaut and Dr Desne Maisne pointed out recently, 'we have to assume most people are not getting their information from these print sources.' This is also compounded by a marked shift in media ownership, further constraining editorial independence, and the increased use of 'churnalism' - a journalistic practice in which headlines that promote 'clicks' and user interaction are chased. While South Africa's media landscape is still judged to be one of the most independent and pluralistic on the African continent, it is worth asking if this impoverishment of news-making inherently fosters more populist attitudes, reflecting an insidious and corrosive process at work.[20] It must also be borne in mind that under President Jacob Zuma, there was a concerted attempt to take over independent media; an attempt in which even the security services were involved. In the view of long-standing South African journalist and former Africa programme editor for BBC World Service, Martin Plaut, 'The free media escaped by a whisker.'

Furthermore, social media and information sharing cannot be pulled out of the context of contemporary South Africa, an extraordinarily unequal society, with profound structural problems dating back to the apartheid era. There already enormous challenges of politics, policies and governance, have only been exacerbated by the pandemic of corruption. Journalists practise their trade amidst a very violent society[21], in which there are high levels of social distrust, not least for the police and security forces, and aggressive rhetoric, political invective and denigration of perceived opponents are the norm. The Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ)

16   Department of Statistics South Africa, http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=13453

17   Digital Population in South Africa, as of January 2020, https://www.statista.com/statistics/685134/south-africa-digital-population/

18   Most popular social media in South Africa 2019, Statista, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1189958/penetration-rate-of-social-media-in-south-africa/

19   https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/South_Africa_DNR_FINAL.pdf . The newspaper with the largest circulation in South Africa is the Daily Sun, a sensationalist tabloid published by Media24, with an estimated daily readership of over 3.8m.

20   Dr Desne Masie, Martin Plaut, and Justin Adams (Democratic Alliance, London Office) in the ICWS panel discussion, 'South African media and the 2019 election', ICWS, School of Advanced Study, 3 April 2019. https://www.sas.ac.uk/videos-and-podcasts/culture-language-and-literature/icws70-south-africa-s-election-and-media

21   According to South African Police (SAP) records: 650,000 acts of violence against victims pa. There are currently 500,000 private security guards in South Africa, twice the number of SAP officers, at a cost of $3.7 billion. Furthermore, the large number of political killings inside the ANC must also be noted. These include assassinations over party political positions, down to ward level – because of the associated access to contracts and preferment that come with such appointments.

was sufficiently concerned for the safety of journalists in the 2019 election campaign that they issued a journalist safety pack for all those covering the elections. The CPJ's advice included the warning that journalists were highly likely to be targeted through smear campaigns and the use of BOTS. The pack offered advice on how to identify fake accounts, as well as how to address online trolling and harassment. The CPJ independent observer attached to the South African Election Commission concluded:

> 'Unlike the 1990s, which brought a clear risk of physical violence, during this campaign journalists had to contend with online harassment, cyber-bulling, toxic social media and fear and uncertainty over whether the digital threats could become physical attacks. As is so often the case in South Africa, it was a court that would ultimately provide journalists with a shot at redress.'

Ranjeni Munusamy, an associate editor at Tiso-Blackstar (publisher of the *Sunday Times, Sowetan and Business Day*) remarked: 'Some of the people making the threats now don't know what it's like to live in a war zone and did not witness people being killed because some or other politician declared them the enemy. They use inflammatory language to fire up their constituencies but seem not to realise that words have direct consequences.'[22]

Social media can certainly have a polarising effect on social attitudes; researchers have noted elsewhere anonymity and associated lack of stigma further drives divisive rhetoric, and such divisive views become more socially acceptable once they have found an echo chamber. Twitter's success also depends on the ability of users to speedily react, comment, and retweet, all too often without the careful consideration and weighing of the veracity of the image or source in question.

There are other conditioning factors which need to be borne in mind when considering the significance of the shift to social media in South Africa. The first is the extent to which this has been exploited by political interests. The notorious case of Bell Pottinger's (a British multinational PR firm) marketing of malicious racialised rhetoric 'white monopoly capitalism' on social media is well known. Originally assumed to be an organic coalesce of views across South Africa, it has since been traced back to the British PR company, funded by Oakbay Capital. The Zondo Commission has revealed the concerted campaign – and diversion of substantial state funds—was intended to control media narratives and steer public opinion. The 2019 election campaign also underlined both beneficial and deeply troubling aspects of social media's reach into the broader population. Social media is attractive to both the ANC and the opposition as it can potentially be used to mobilise their supporters by both overt and covert means. Democratic Alliance politicians have used social media to disseminate anti-immigrant rhetoric during the campaign. The African National Congress party (ANC), generously funded by state resources, had also established a 'war room' to manipulate social media, and was behind a number of highly deliberate interventions to spread a hard-line political message to South African voters, by denigrating their opponents with allegations of theft and embezzlement through the use of Twitter bots and fake accounts.[23] Furthermore, while South African politicians condemned outbreaks of violence against foreigners in Durban, their anti-immigrant rhetoric used during the election campaign actually stimulated xenophobic feeling.[24]

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22 The South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) filed a court case against the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)'s leaders and their supporters, seeking to ban the EFF from 'using any platform, including social media, to intimidate, harass, threaten or assault journalists.' https://cpj.org/2019/07/south-africa-election-journalists-online-harassment-threats-doxx

23 Democratic Alliance (DA) activists were acutely concerned that their WhatsApp groups might be infiltrated by hostile ANC operatives, despite end-to-end encryption. Justin Adams, 'The South Africa 2019 election and the media', Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 3 April 2019.

24 The strongest condemnation for xenophobic attacks came from EFF leader, Julius Malema; yet Malema regularly makes inflammatory comments against 'Boers', Jews and south Asians. https://www.dw.com/en/south-africas-politicians-feed-anti-foreigner-violence/a-48157900

This is on top of what media commentators, academics and researchers have identified as Facebook users' response to the resonance of a presented narrative, reflecting pre-existing confirmation bias. The South African Election Commission, in collaboration with Media Monitoring (Africa) was sufficiently concerned about the spread of disinformation to set up a digital fact checking website, Real411, so that members of the public could both double check information presented via social media and report fake news, disinformation, or incitement to violence.

Given the political and social environment of contemporary South Africa, is social media being used to actively orchestrate xenophobia in the country? As with all things in South Africa, it is a complicated picture. Whereas researchers before believed that individual tweets were autonomous, and trending of particular messaging was the result of spontaneous Twitter cascades, disturbing patterns have been identified in which social media platforms, particularly Twitter, have been used to organise groups to articulate anti-foreign attitudes, perform hate crimes and xenophobic acts of violence. Separate investigations by the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC) at the University of Cape Town, and the Atlantic Council's Data Forensic Research Lab have highlighted this new development. The CABC requested Real411 to investigate and adjudicate on 90 Twitter messages and their (supposed) authors, using the hashtag #PutSouthAfricaFirst (#PSAF). This hashtag was first used on Twitter in April 2020 by former mayor of Johannesburg, Herman Mashaba; Mashaba followed this up with posts on his Facebook page.[25] Mashaba was rightly criticised for incorporating images of supposed immigrants involved in attempted carjackings and drug deals—images which could not be verified. However, Mashaba has remained unrepentant, and has now set up a new political party, Action SA, which launched in August 2020. CABC's study concluded by noting that 'some accounts are breaking the law with impunity and sowing social discord in full view'.[26]Some sections of #PSAF supporters firmly declared that this was a peaceful and non-violent movement, seeking to emphasise the importance of South Africa's SMEs. The CABC noted that 'nearly all prominent accounts are careful not to publish content that meets the legal definition of hate speech or incitement to violence.' However, a cohort of #PutSouthAfricaFirst users have used Twitter as a platform to disseminate hate speech, blaming foreign nationals in South Africa for a wide range of social issues and the source of grievances. CABC identified that by October 2020, #PSAF was the second most popular hashtag on Twitter, having been used in '393,000 tweets and generating more than a billion impressions' since its first usage.

In their separate study, which used data analysis gathered from Twitter's API to investigate the #PutSouthAfricaFirst phenomenon, the Atlantic Council's Data Forensic Research Lab (DFRL) concluded that striking circulation of the #PSAF hashtag had amplified beliefs that criminal activity and service failures could be attributed to foreigners. As the South African economy contracted as a direct result of COVID-19 restrictions and formal unemployment spiralled, the hashtags #PutSouthAfricansFirst, #ZimbabweansMustFall, #NigeriansMustGo, and #InfluxOfImmigrantsMustStop took root online. Many social media users began blaming foreigners for taking away South Africans' jobs. DFRL noted that the anti-immigrant hashtags which trended across South African Twitter throughout June and early July 2020 were periodically kickstarted by an anonymous Twitter account called @uLerato_pillay.

25 https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=181225579682024

26 Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change, 28 October 2020, reported in the Daily Maverick, https://www. dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-10-28-putsouthafricansfirst-spreading-hate-speech-inciting-violence-breaking-the-law/

> *'The account participated in multiple follow-back campaigns from when it joined Twitter in an attempt to build its number of followers. These campaigns allow users to bloat their follower counts artificially as participants in a Twitter thread all follow each other. At time of analysis, @uLerato_pillay had 57,847 followers. On multiple occasions, the account posted images saying it had reached its follow limit and would resume following accounts at a later stage. It also used the trending Afrophobic hashtags to promote follow-back campaigns in order to grow its follower count still further and encouraged its followers to use the hashtags similarly as a means to grow their own follower numbers.'[27]*

The DFRL concludes: 'Although the DFRLab was not able to identify the person operating the @uLerato_pillay account, there are clear connections between the account and another Twitter account, @SfisoGwala_SA, as well as the SouthAfricaFirst political party. The @uLerato_pillay account, which engaged in deceptive behavior by claiming other people's images as its own and artificially bloating its follower count, has been instrumental in amplifying Afrophobic hashtags on South African Twittersphere. Its connection to a political party that is built on removing foreign nationals from South Africa is of concern in the wider Afrophobic context that plagues the country.' DFRL noted that on some days, the Twitter cascade reached 25,000 tweets and retweets, and that a conversation 'involving 5,000–6,000 people grew to 80,000 over a few months.' In addition, DRFL found evidence that this circulation was being deliberately orchestrated by a sophisticated network of social media influencers 'to amplify Twitter.' The DFRL team concluded that there was clearly 'money behind this' and that the repercussions can be felt in the political space.[28]

Human rights defenders have been similarly alarmed by this 'new level' of xenophobia. In September 2020 German news agency Deutsche Welle (DW) issued an extensive report on the #PSAF movement's allegations that foreign nationals are mainly responsible for crimes such as robbery, sex slavery, kidnappings, human trafficking, and drugs.[29] DW pointed out that #PSAF are the first organised group to openly declare that solving South Africa's crime and unemployment problems must involve deporting non-South African nationals. On the 23rd September, #PSAF organised a march in Pretoria, in which hundreds of protestors walked under the banner '#PSAF' to the Zimbabwe and Nigerian embassies, demanding 'foreigners must go'. This had been organised almost exclusively on social media, and echoes DFRL's view that these events demonstrate how social media is being deliberately used to stoke 'Afrophobia'.

Of course, social media has also provided platforms of support for immigrants/migrant workers at times of xenophobic violence,[30] and provides a crucial means of communication to vulnerable migrant communities at times of xenophobic tension. Mainstream media (television and radio) has also issued statements calling for calm, condemning manifestations of violence against African and Asian migrants. Africa Check, whose main centre in South Africa is based at the University of Witwatersrand's Journalism Department, has a well-established record of countering disinformation. Similarly, news organisations and platforms such as Amabhungane, the Daily Maverick and the South African Institute for Race Relations have been fighting against the tide of xenophobia and Afrophobia. The annual South African Social Attitudes Survey also provides an excellent account of long-term trends, as well as 'the speed and direction of changing public participation in anti-immigrant behaviour.'

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27 In a May 2020 tweet, uLerato_Pillay, endorsed Mario Khumalo of South Africa First. "African Diaspora Forum spokesperson Amir Sheikh dismissed the SouthAfricaFirst movement as a "campaign of hatred" led by Khumalo, former Johannesburg mayor Herman Mashaba, African Transformation Movement president Vuyo Zungula, the National Truck Drivers Association, among others, and supported by the ANC. Sheikh denied that illegal African migrants have benefited from the sale of ID documents, jobs and businesses."

28 https://medium.com/dfrlab/afrophobic-south-african-twitter-account-connected-to-nationalist-political-party-7e7205cc8987)

29 'South Africa: Hatred of migrants reaches new heights', Deutsche Welle, 29 September 2020. https://www.dw.com/en/south-africa-hatred-of-migrants-reaches-new-heights/a-55093941

30 In April 2015, King Goodwill Zwelithini xenophobic statements prompted South Africans demonstrating against xenophobia and violence on social media. Approximately 10,000 marched in Durban, supported by Twitter hashtag campaigns such as #PeaceMarch, #SayNoToXenophobia, and #UnitedForAfrica.

There is an important debate in South Africa about immigration and refugee policy, and how the country should address long-term structural unemployment and foster inclusive development. In terms of actively addressing xenophobia and Afrophobia—notwithstanding President Ramaphosa's condemnation of anti-foreigner violence - there has been a culture of 'denialism and government (in)action'.[31] South Africa will certainly need sustained political leadership and clear protection of rights under its Constitution, to ensure that the police protect victims of violence and harassment, that perpetrators of xenophobic violence are prosecuted, and that big tech companies are obliged to take greater responsibility and be more proactive in removing posts that contain hate speech. It would be an excellent start if South African politicians made a genuine and sustained commitment to moderate their rhetoric on their Twitter accounts and Facebook pages. ■

31 Kudzayi Savious Tarisayi & Sadhana Manik, 'An unabating challenge: Media portrayal of xenophobia in South Africa', Cogent Arts & Humanities, Volume 7, 2020, Issue 1.

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