

A South African Case Study in Social Activism: #Pay Back The Money

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Abstract

The advent of the social media has revolutionized social activism. The cause of the social activism campaign that is being interrogated is the non-security related improvements at the private homestead of the South African President, Jacob Zuma. After a tug of war of more than 4 years the Constitutional Court had to decide on what features Zuma had to pay for. The case triggered a tsunami of responses in the social media. In this paper the researcher reports on an analysis of 185 purposefully selected tweets that featured on the Twitter platform.

Keywords: Collaboration, advocacy, citizens

Introduction

Social activism dates back to the 1900s, when individuals and interest groups lobbied for women's suffrage (the right to vote), laws protecting the environment and consumers, an end to lynching, and government-subsidized health care but they were branded as "impractical idealists, utopian dreamers, or dangerous socialists" [1]. Nowadays these aspects are all addressed in legislation.

Atkinson [2] defines social activism as "collaborations by people in order to advocate for a position, nurture conflicts in society, or violate or transgress laws or norms in society." "For liberal thinkers, civil society is a bottom-up driver of democracy because it counters the authoritarian tendencies of the state and energizes citizens' activism in defence of civil and political rights" [3]. Thus, the civil society arena becomes the platform of civic resistance against any forms of political abuse. Uldam and Vestergaard [4] postulate that "(c)ivic activism has always produced tension between citizens who promote new and challenging demands and the responses of official institutions that typically lag behind the arc of change. In many cases, official responses are not simply slow; they may be repressive." This premise will be the central focus of the dispute that is addressed in this paper.

The cause of the social activism campaign that is being interrogated is the non-security-related improvements at the private homestead of the South African President, Jacob Zuma. The President steadfastly refused to pay for any of the expenses. He held that he didn't request any of the non-security features that were installed. The features that were queried included an amphitheatre, a visitor centre, a cattle kraal, a chicken run, and a swimming pool that was branded a firepool on the architectural drawings. After a tug of war of more than 4 years the Constitutional Court had to decide on what features President Zuma had to pay for. In a major intervention a week before the case was heard in the Constitutional Court, the President changed his plea. A daily newspaper, The Citizen, published the following report:

In a statement issued by the Presidency late on Tuesday night President Jacob Zuma has proposed to pay back an amount to be determined by the Auditor-General and the minister of Finance for any benefit he derived from the upgrades to his Nkandla homestead.

This statement came a week before the Constitutional Court is set to hear applications by [2 political parties,] the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and Democratic Alliance (DA) to declare Zuma's actions to implement remedial action proposed by the Public Protector, unconstitutional.

[5]

The political situation regarding the Nkandla saga and the #Paybackthemoney campaign that it triggered mirror the following comment by Dahlgren [6] "Many citizens feel an estrangement from – and often a growing cynicism towards – governments and the political process; corruption scandals tend to confirm the view many citizens have of the power elites." These feelings are reflected in that part of the social sphere that is made up of the social media.

Background

On 20 November 2011 the Mail & Guardian (a South African weekly) broke the news that massive upgrades are on the way at Nkandla, the homestead of Jacob Zuma, the President of South Africa [7]. The Mail & Guardian [8] reveals on November 16, 2012 that a network of underground bunkers have been built at Nkandla. It is also revealed that one of the contractors on site employs Zuma's niece [7].

Zuma addresses Parliament about Nkandla for the first time On November 21, 2012. He claims his family has paid for the construction of Nkandla and claims he is still paying off the bond on the property (Sole & Faull, 2014). On 30 November 2012 Constitutional law expert, Professor Pierre de Vos, asks Madonsela to probe whether Zuma breached the executive ethics code by lying to Parliament [7].

The Democratic Alliance becomes the first political party to enter the fray by asking the Public Protector to investigate Nkandla. By October her office confirms it has started a preliminary investigation [9].

On 7 April 2013 the Department of Public Works releases abbreviated findings of its own probe into Nkandla, which notes many failures by the department, but effectively exonerates Zuma [7].

The Public Protector, Thuli Madonsela announced on 8 November 2013 that the Nkandla report is complete. She indicated she isn't sure whether to submit the report to Zuma. Ordinarily, her reports implicating cabinet ministers are handed to Zuma as head of the executive [7].

On 20 November 2013 the Security cluster ministers filed an urgent interdict application, seeking to stop Madonsela from releasing her report into the upgrades. They withdraw their application two weeks later (M & G, 2014). Madonsela replied on 28 November 2013 that she plans to address security concerns raised by the ministers, but indicates that she will have the final say over what is included in the report [7].

On 28 November 2013 the M&G revealed excerpts from Madonsela's draft provisional report, which indicate Zuma received "substantial" personal gain from the upgrades, and that he will have to pay back the state. Madonsela denied on 2 December 2013 that the leaks are from her office [7].

The ANC and Madonsela briefed the media separately ON 4 December 2013. The ANC accused Madonsela of being responsible for the leaking of the provisional report, but Madonsela rubbished the claims [7.] On 19 December 2013 the full Ministerial task team released a report that fully exonerates Zuma [7].

Madonsela released her final report on 19 March 2014 [10]. The report is titled "Secure in Comfort".

National Assembly speaker Max Sisulu announced on April 10, 2014 that a 12-member Parliamentary ad hoc committee will investigate the various reports and recommendations on Nkandla[11]. “MrSisulu’s instruction to the committee was that it must consider the three documents he tabled when he announced the committee. The documents were Zuma’s response to the public protector report, his proclamation appointing the Special Investigation Unit (SIU) to investigate allegations of corruption, and the public protector’s report itself” [11].

Corruption Watch, an interest group that specializes in the monitoring and reporting of corruption in South Africa reported that the Public Protector responded as follows on one of the issues raised in the Nhleko report:

A claim is made in Minister Nhleko’s report, which incorrectly states that the public protector found that “no public funds was used to build the president’s house(s)” (sic). This could not be further from the truth. According to paragraph 10.10.1.1. of the public protector’s report: “President Zuma told Parliament that his family had built its own houses and the state had not built any for it or benefited them. This was not true. It is common cause that in the name of security, government built for the president and his family at his private residence a visitor’s centre ...” This is important because the visitor’s centre itself is a house, a double story building.

[12]

Literature Review

The advent of the social media has revolutionized social activism. Uldam and Vestergaard[4] refer to the need for civic engagement and define it as “extra-parliamentarian political participation”. Dahlgren [6] voiced his concern about the decline in citizens’ participation in politics while Svirsky [13] advanced that activism relates to “stirring both thought and action.” According to the Cambridge dictionary [14] activism reflects “ the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one.

Cammaerts[15] is of the opinion that a strong linkage exists between social media and the formation and functioning of activism campaigns. He advanced that “social media platforms and the communicative practices they enable can potentially become constitutive of the construction of collective identities and have become highly relevant in view of disseminating, communicating, recording, and archiving a variety of movement discourses and deeds” (Cammaerts [15]).

Although researchers differ on the political influence wielded by the social media [16].Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, and Wollebæk[17] pointed out thatsocial media have become central to coordinate political actions, express political views, and for issue-oriented advocacy. Their work on the Rose Marches that followed the 22/7 terror attacks in Norway in 2011 confirmed what they branded the obilization thesis that entailed that the “social media represent an alternative structure alongside mainstream media and well-established political organizations and civil society that recruit in different ways and reach different segments of the population.”

Cammaerts[15] reached the following conclusion:

(S)ocial media and so-called Web 2.0 applications have played both an instrumental and a constitutive role for activists worldwide in their efforts to disseminate social movement discourses, to mobilize for direct actions online as well as offline, to coordinate direct action, and to self-mediate acts of resistance potentially leading to movement spill-overs.

The sociologist ZeynepTufekci[17] [18] described the new media landscape in the Arab world as ‘a game-changer’. The combination of a politicised pan-Arab TV network (Al Jazeera), widely available mobile phones with photo and video capabilities, and the rapid growth of social media such as Facebook and YouTube since 2009, has created a ‘new media ecology’ that authoritarian regimes are finding very difficult to control. He does however warn that the mere establishment of a well-orchestrated media campaign guarantees success. “The expressive, often humorous style of networked protests attracts many participants and thrives both online and offline, but movements falter in the long term unless they create the capacity to navigate the inevitable challenges” [19].

Cammaerts[15] postulated that “social media platforms and the communicative practices they enable can potentially become constitutive of the construction of collective identities and have become highly relevant in view of disseminating, communicating, recording, and archiving a variety of movement discourses and deeds.”

The undermining of public trust and confidence by politicians or influential business figures often trigger the loss of public trust. Hay [21] identified three basic perceptions that undermine public trust and legitimacy in the domain of government and politics:

- Political elites subvert the collective public interest for party- or self-interest, while at the same time claiming to serve the public.
- Political elites are captured by corporate interests.
- Government is inefficient in using public funds.

The construct of political elites are closely related to that of the public sphere. According to Uldam and Westergaard[4] “the mushrooming of social media can be seen as a vehicle for counter public spheres that can challenge the dominant public sphere and its reliance on traditional mainstream media.” Bruns [22] individuals, but instead a patchwork of overlapping public spheres centred around specific themes and communities ... the remnants of that mass-mediated public sphere itself, indeed, remain as just one among many other such public spheres.”

Methodology

Understanding social movements requires an analysis of the battle over interests and ideas [1]. Many of these battles are fought on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. De Bakker [23] pointed out that “the importance of microblogging service Twitter for activists has attracted a lot of attention over the last few years, both in the scholarly literature and in the popular press” and that “(m)any of these studies have examined how Twitter has been used to inform and mobilize (potential) activists. Although some critics like Juris [24] others maintain that “(t)he use of Twitter and Facebook can also produce a sense of connectedness and copresence, potentially eliciting powerful feelings of solidarity as protesters read about distant and not-so-distant others engaged in the same or kindred actions and protests” [25].

In this paper the researcher analysed tweets that featured on the Twitter platform after President Zuma announced that he was prepared to pay back some of the money spent by the State on Nkandla. The methodology used corresponds with that used by Smith, Men and Al-Sinan [26] in their analysis of 770 tweets that were posted during the Taksim Square protests that took place in Turkey during 2013. In this study Smith *et al.* [26] the researchers zoomed in on the use of social media to communicate power and seek change.

The researcher gathered, purposefully sampled, and classified the tweets manually. Since some of the tweets became the subjects of large scale metajournalism, that aspect was also taken into account. Metajournalism includes features such as hashtags and retweeting help spread news and information faster than other media, whether in normal or crisis situations, and get people with shared interests closer to each other [27].

In the next section a selection of the results from the preliminary classification is shared.

Findings

The following themes were detected during content analysis of the Twitter feed:

Distrust

I woke up to the news that Zuma is willing to #PayBackTheMoney. This is just a stunt because SONA next week.

Two years later he decides to #PayBackTheMoney in an election year. We still see right through your politics Baba"

@Zuma paying back the money is just shifting public funds from 1 account to the next. He's paying back the money w/ur money #PayBackTheMoney

I say he's trying to fool EFF into shutting their mouths next week and calming the voters before he laughs again..... #PayBackTheMoney

A positive tone.

It is a step in the right direction if the president is considering to #PayBackTheMoney Let's let the political parties hash it out first.

A negative tone

Paying back the money will not solve what damaged you've done to our country

Sarcasm

Dear JZ, if you willing to #PayBackTheMoney can you also do us a favor to step down tuuuu. Thank u in advance!

Other political themes

The State of the Nation address of the President (SONA)

I woke up to the news that Zuma is willing to #PayBackTheMoney. This is just a stunt because SONA next week.

"Okay, okay, I'll #PayBackTheMoney, just don't disrupt my SONA please, ne?"

Elections

Elections are coming up and this might just serve as a campaigning strategy. Good move.

Because the **elections** are around the corner now you want to pay, money paid or not am not voting #PayBackTheMoney

Masquerading

#PayBackTheMoney, we can now say there's no firepool in #Nkandla, it reverts to its real name Swimming pool

Accountability of the President

People that did the upgrades will pay in collective amount, not him because he didn't appoint anyone #PayBackTheMoney

Accountability of other parties

All ministers & MPs who vociferously defended Zuma on #PayBackTheMoney. Their 'outrage' & half-witted arguments!

Where are those who were protecting Zuma #PayBackTheMoney

The motivation

Perhaps it was Mbeki's letters that prompted Jacob Zuma to rethink his own legacy

#PayBackTheMoney

The amount

Me I want to know what equation will be used to calculate how much he'll pay, put my high-school algebra to use once #PayBackTheMoney

Please guys don't get too excited yet, he said "SOME". With Zuma some could be R1000 for the chicken kraal #PayBackTheMoney

The quality of the work

#PayBackTheMoney but honestly where was that money spent on that shabby looking thing we see on tvaowa with plastic chairs in meeting area

How can a sitting president want to be a beneficiary of the #RDP house? They're intended for the unemployed. #PayBackTheMoney.

The funding

How can a sitting president want to be a beneficiary of the #RDP house? They're intended for the unemployed. **#PayBackTheMoney**.

Zuma it's gonna take our provident fund money to **#PayBackTheMoneyMxm**

Hahaha RT @Makgab21: If u get a callback from dis number 0761000354 pls don't cal back, it's Jacob Zuma looking for a loan. **#PayBackTheMoney**

Escape

#Nkandla The DA says the President's made the decision on **#PayBackTheMoney** because he knew the legal process would hold him accountable.

How will the EFF & DA continue applying pressure on **#PayBackTheMoney** now that Baba has "offered" to pay? They'll be seen to be unreasonable.

Hidden costs

While you're planning to **#PayBackTheMoney** Zuma, let's not forget to pay back the court fees and committees' wages you had set up.

Credit

But DA didn't do anything, EFF was beat up, kicked out, Suspended, where was DA, fearfully sitting and just commenting. **#PayBackTheMoney**

South Africa, we need to say well done and thank you to **#EFF** MPs for pursuing **#PayBackTheMoney**. That was courageous and right thing to do.

Blame

#Zuma agreeing to **#PayBackTheMoney** means @MyANC_ in Parliament was wrong and have no interest in a democratic South Africa **#ANCMustFall**

JZ must blame his stooges who kept misinforming him that there was no need to **#PayBackTheMoney** since 2011.

Threats

Zuma wants to **#PayBackTheMoney** cause the elections are around the corner... we not fools man, u going down this time.

Emotions

I'm **shocked**. ..Miracles still happens. Zuma paying back the money

I have never heard such complete rubbish. Every public utterance has been to not **#PayBackTheMoney** **#UTurn** much? [**Anger**]

Jest

#PayBackTheMoney, we can now say there's no firepool in **#Nkandla**, it reverts to its real name Swimming pool

Now we know what our pension money will be used for ...lol. @Radio702 @SlieAfrica

#PayBackTheMoney

I'll **#PayBackTheMoney**, a political infomercial- "But wait, there's more! You also get a free t shirt! All for just the price of your vote!"

The outcome

Not only @ThuliMadonsela3 and political parties emerged victorious on Zuma's concession to **#PayBackTheMoney**, but all RSA.

Cartoons

The cartoonists had a field day with the Nkandla report. Annexure A depicts the report of the Public Protector which triggered a new wave of tweets about the scandal. Jacob Zuma is depicted as Gulliver in Annexure B. It links the scandal to the children's novel written by Jonathan Swift that was published in 1726.

Top retweets on Nkandla report by the Public Protector

ThuliMadonsela (The Public Protector in her personal capacity). Thank you South Africa. As Public Protector Team, we value your feedback. Your reaction suggests you'd have made the same ruling on **#Nkandla** [11:29 AM - 24 Mar 2014](#)

Conversations: 75, Retweets: 218, Likes: 119

Ferial Haffajee (Editor). ANC has stood with Pres. JZ on arms deal, spy tapes, rape trial, Guptagate. Will it do so this time? Thoughts? [1:16 PM - 19 Mar 2014](#)

The Public Protector. (The office). Madonsela: If government becomes lawbreaker, it breeds contempt for law. #PPpresser #NkandlaReport [1:12 PM - 19 Mar 2014](#)

Conversations: 11, Retweets: 158, Likes: 19

Ferial Haffajee. #NkandlaReport In a good society, the President, Public Works minister, Police minister would put finishing touches on resignation letters. [1:48 PM - 19 Mar 2014](#)

Conversations: 58, Retweets: 488, Likes: 108

Justice Malala. (Political commentator, media entrepreneur) So #Zuma did not wilfully mislead Parly, yet he received constant updates on the project. He didn't ask the right questions? #NkandlaReport

Conversations: 26, Retweets: 88, Likes: 10

IG: Concept65 (A private concern). Nkandla cattle are 'secure in comfort' while our people live in shacks. #NkandlaReport

[2:02 PM - 19 Mar 2014](#)

Conversations: 26, Retweets: 88, Likes: 10

Analysis

The findings were generated from the Twitter narratives. Under breadth the author classified the diversity of the topics that were generated in the narrative. Depth reflected how deep the Twitterati drilled into the topics under discussion. The breadth varies from emotion (distrust) to tone (positive/negative), and from accountability to jest. The breadth of the participants varied from the office of Public Protector to tweets that she sent in her personal capacity to editors and other professional journalists. Citizen journalists enthusiastically contributed. So did cartoonists.

The great depth of the discussions are illustrated by the comments related to the President's last minute offer to pay for the non-security features. His motives, accountability and funding were interrogated. The narrative also drifted to the State of the Nation address by the President (SONA) as well as the elections of 2019 (the end of the President's final tenure). The quality and the nature of the featured prominently in the discussions.

Conclusion

This paper frames an important milestone during the reign of the current President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma. An analysis was done on 185 tweets that were purposefully sampled between 2011 and 2016. It reflected on a social activism campaign that was prompted by non-security expenses that was incurred at the private homestead of the president. After several governmental and parliamentary committees cleared the president of all accountability, two political parties took him to the Constitutional court to force him to pay. Less than a week before the case was supposed to be heard, he offered to pay. This offer triggered the tweets that were analysed during the study.

The results of the analysis illustrated the power of the social media, in this case Twitter, to feed the political agenda with a myriad of themes. The fact that citizen journalists enjoy the same access rights to these media platforms than the professional journalists resulted in a vibrant and diverse narrative. This study rendered more proof that the social media has irrevocably changed the activism landscape. The article forms part of the researcher's endeavour to formulate a proliferation theory that holds that political and/or polemic discussions generate a wider array of subthemes in their narratives than those of a less conflictual nature. This premise is substantiated

by the breadth and the depth of the narratives that were analysed in this study.

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Annexure A



Annexure B

