



**The women journalists of
South Africa's Daily Maverick:
SEXUALIZED, SILENCED
AND LABELED SATAN**

BIG DATA CASE STUDY

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CONTENT WARNING: This report includes graphic content that illustrates the severity of online violence against women, including references to sexual violence and gendered profanities. This content is not included gratuitously. It is essential to enable the analysis of the types, methods and patterns of attacks against the South African women journalists of *Daily Maverick*.

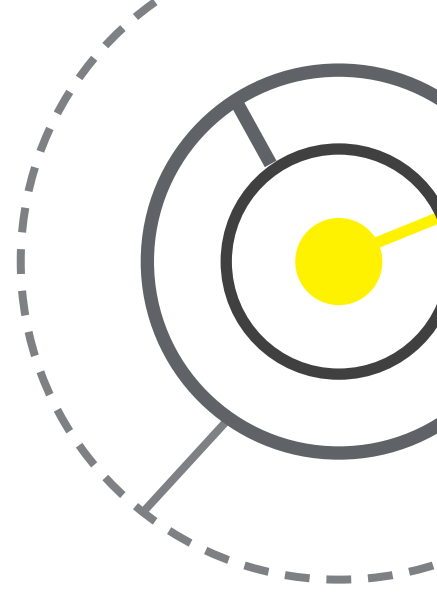
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INTRODUCTION

There's actually a causality between attacks on social media and what happens in the real world. It's very difficult to say to a judge or to a prosecutor that when you are being called 'Satan' or 'a witch is burning'...or anything like that - the psychology behind [it] is to dehumanize you. It's to make you seem less human so that it's okay to attack this person. And when you do that, that is when people start to say that you must be raped to teach you a lesson, or you must be necklaced.

- Pauli van Wyk, 2022

This Big Data Case Study represents a comprehensive assessment of the online violence directed at women journalists employed by South African independent investigative journalism outlet *Daily Maverick* who have been targeted in the course of their reporting. It deploys qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews¹ and content analysis, blended with quantitative methods such as network analysis and Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques applied to large datasets.

Ferial Haffajee – the main case presented here – is a former Editor-in-Chief of major South African outlets the *Mail & Guardian* and *City Press*, and she is currently employed by the *Daily Maverick* as a reporter and Associate Editor. As the first South African woman journalist to be the target of a highly coordinated online violence campaign which deployed gendered disinformation, her case is considered nationally emblematic, and it is the main focus of this report.

However, the experiences of online violence endured by two other women journalists employed by the *Daily Maverick* – Pauli van Wyk and Rebecca Davis – are also discussed to broaden the scope of analysis and reflect the targeting of the outlet at an institutional level. In South Africa, while individual women journalists are subjected to online violence, attacks are often triggered in association with a targeted outlet or particular reporting themes, rather than being personality-focused.

For example, in other countries, such as the Philippines and India, the online violence campaigns will target an individual woman journalist and automatically attack

1 All quotes featured in this report are derived from original interviews unless indicated otherwise.

almost everything that she posts, publishes or says regardless of its content (as with [Filipino-US journalist Maria Ressa](#), and [Indian journalist Rana Ayyub](#), whose cases we have also studied in detail) in an effort to chill her reporting and reduce her visibility in general.

In South Africa, however, online violence perpetrators tend to launch an attack on a woman journalist when she publishes or posts about a particular topic, organization, or public figure.² Therefore, any woman journalist in South Africa who publishes investigative work on, for example, State corruption or the actions of populist political party the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and its leaders, becomes a potential target for online violence. This also means that different women journalists will experience varying levels of abuse at different times depending on the attack triggers.

Since the *Daily Maverick* is one of the South Africa's leading investigative outfits, and because it employs a high number of women journalists in a country with horrific levels of sexual violence, its writers have been frequently targeted relative to other media outlets.

For this study, we conducted a detailed technical analysis of over a quarter of a million tweets directed at two of the women studied: investigative reporters Ferial Haffajee and Pauli van Wyk. A factor affecting our decision to study abuse against van Wyk in addition to Haffajee is that Haffajee changed her behavior in terms of the topics covers as a direct result of being so prolifically targeted in the past on Twitter. In 2021, she [explained that she was steering away](#) from reporting on issues that she knew would trigger abuse. As a result, there are fewer abuse spikes to analyze, and a lower volume of abuse targeting Haffajee in the time period of our data collection compared to earlier periods.

We also examine *Daily Maverick* reporter Rebecca Davis' experiences of online violence, the function of which is to inform our qualitative research. We did not perform a technical analysis of tweets directed at Davis because she was not active on social media during the data collection period.

These three women reflect experiences of online violence at the intersection of misogyny, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation - acts which are frequently perpetrated and fueled by political actors and partisan journalists.

The Twitter data

While women journalists also experience abuse and harassment on other platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and Tiktok) Twitter is still frequently used by South African journalists and it therefore continues to be a site for significant online violence. So, Twitter remains an important source of data for the study of the targeting of women journalists in South Africa.

Our original dataset was collected between 1 January 2021 and 30 August 2022 during the first phase of our Online Violence Alert and Response system project which was funded by the U.K.'s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). During this period, we gathered 271,563 posts directed at Haffajee and van Wyk, and analyzed them using Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools to assess and characterize the data.

We are currently monitoring online violence towards Haffajee, van Wyk, and multiple other *Daily Maverick* journalists alongside abuse directed at the outlet in the context of the South African election to be staged on 29 May 2024. Preliminary findings indicate that in the six weeks before the 2024 poll, *Daily Maverick* was attacked as an institution on social media, predominantly in connection with a campaign to spotlight the cost of [silencing critical independent journalism](#) in the country.

2 The topics which have triggered online violence against the South African women studied are discussed in sections 2 and 3 of this Big Data Case Study.

About the *Daily Maverick*

Since its inception in 2009, the *Daily Maverick* has prioritized original content and has published [some of the most influential investigative exposés](#) in South Africa's post-democratic history. Founded as a digital news site, its online content is free to access without a paywall,³ but it offers premium content to paid members. In 2020, *Daily Maverick* also launched a weekly newspaper.

Its high-impact investigations have led to intensified assaults by various governmental and private actors, as well as political parties, State institutions and companies. This is part of a broader trend in targeted attacks on independent media, journalists and editors in South Africa, often expressed through social media abuse and disinformation campaigns. In this context, journalists have [also been harassed and physically assaulted](#) outside their homes or in public spaces, and their property has been damaged.

15 KEY FINDINGS

1. Twitter remains⁴ a key platform for political actors in South Africa and it is used both by legitimate accounts as well as fake bot armies and/or malicious accounts to abuse, harass and threaten the women journalists with a clear intent to silence them and suppress their critical reporting.
2. Women journalists at the *Daily Maverick* experience highly sexualized online violence which sometimes references acts of extreme sexual violence, such as being "shot in the pussy."
3. Approximately 60% of all obvious abuse in our original Twitter dataset directed at Ferial Haffajee and 54% against Pauli van Wyk constituted personal attacks.
4. Approximately 46% of the abuse directed at van Wyk and 40% towards Haffajee appears to be explicitly designed to discredit them professionally.
5. Approximately 21% of obvious abuse directed at Pauli van Wyk in our dataset is sexist, misogynistic or sexualized, while just over 18% of attacks on Ferial Haffajee can be categorized as such.
6. Gendered disinformation is a prominent aspect of targeted online violence against *Daily Maverick's* women journalists. This includes falsely accusing them of peddling disinformation, and the routine deployment of the pernicious portmanteau 'presstitute'. Gendered disinformation is also a tactic used by partisan South African press to amplify or trigger attacks on *Daily Maverick* journalists.
7. Criticism about corruption involving the ANC and EFF resulted in the highest percentage of abuse (24%) targeted at Ferial Haffajee. These are mostly general and reputational attacks, and contain more sexual remarks compared to others.

³ It attracts 10-12 million unique visitors per month (Source Google Analytics).

⁴ Twitter was rebranded as 'X' in July 2023 after South African-born Elon Musk took ownership of the platform.

8. Tweets sent by Pauli van Wyk were more than twice as likely to trigger abusive comments compared to rate of abusive replies to Ferial Haffajee's tweets according to analysis of our unique dataset.
9. Over half (56%) of the thematic catalysts for abuse towards van Wyk can be classified under "corruption" and "politics and government," with the majority of abusive tweets concerning the VBS Mutual Bank scandal, which was extensively reported by van Wyk.
10. According to analysis of our unique Twitter dataset, reputational attacks are correlated with reporting on illegal conduct while general abusive remarks are mostly triggered by posts connected to reporting critical of the State.
11. The less the women journalists of the *Daily Maverick* journalists posted on Twitter, the lower the rates of abuse became. This highlights the **chilling effect** of gendered online violence which is designed to mute the freedom of expression and visibility of women journalists.
12. In instances where a woman journalist is not present or active on Twitter, abusers resort to alternative means and platforms to target her. They also still publish abusive and threatening comments about her on the platform in her absence.
13. In South Africa, abusers perpetrating online violence against women journalists do not stem from a singular group with a homogenous ideological, political, or social position. Rather, a complex web of factors motivates the violence, originating from multiple sources, which include government actors and representatives of the African National Congress (ANC) ruling party and/or from Julius Malema, the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party, and his supporters.
14. The South African Police Service (SAPS) and the criminal justice system are often unresponsive to online violence targeting women journalists, and do not have enough familiarity with the issue, nor the digital capability, to deal with it timeously or effectively.
15. When women journalists report instances of online violence to Twitter, the company has consistently failed or refused to act against the abuser by removing abusive content or closing the abusive account. Frequently, the company does not even respond to reports from women journalists targeted. Many abusive and threatening tweets, some of which contain death threats, remain visible on Twitter years after they were originally posted. The situation has deteriorated further since Elon Musk assumed ownership of the company.
16. Given South Africa's tense political climate, together with high rates of gender-based violence in the country, there is a heightened risk that online violence will translate into physical violence against women journalists, particularly during political flashpoints and power struggles in the country. This concern has led to the temporary relocation of a number of women journalists employed by the *Daily Maverick* who have been targeted online.

2

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed methods approach, deploying qualitative research methods such as deep contextual research and long form interviews with abuse targets and key responders in combination with quantitative research methods associated with computational linguistics.

The qualitative research performed for this study served to supplement and contextualize the technical analysis of Twitter data. This involved substantive desktop research to explain the local socio-political context in which South African women journalists work, and to assess the risks within that context. Further, the case study draws on qualitative interviews conducted with Branko Brkic, Editor-in-Chief of the *Daily Maverick*, journalists Rebecca Davis and Pauli van Wyk, and Kate Skinner, former executive director of the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF). Ferial Haffajee was interviewed at length for related research. Her personal testimonies through writing, within documentary films, and at international speaking events or on expert panels were also analyzed.

The quantitative analysis of big data for this study focused on a total of 181,480 tweets relating to Ferial Haffajee and 90,083 tweets relating to Pauli Van Wyk. The primary Twitter data collection for Ferial Haffajee contains 76,041 tweets spanning the period 30 August 2021 to 1 March

271
THOUSAND
TWEETS
WERE ANALYZED

COLLECTED BETWEEN
1 JANUARY 2021 AND 1 MARCH 2022

2022, collected in real-time. This was supplemented by an additional dataset of 105,439 tweets relating to Haffajee posted during the period 1 January 2021 to 30 August 2021, collected post-hoc. This means that it does not contain any messages which were deleted (or where the accounts were longer available on Twitter) prior to the collection date. The dataset for Pauli Van Wyk was also collected retrospectively.

We applied Natural Language Processing (NLP) and network analysis techniques to the three datasets, using the same methodology as for our [previous Big Data Case Studies](#).

We then conducted a closer NLP analysis of the tweets detected as 'clearly abusive' to determine the characteristics of the abuse and categorize them according to our abuse typology. It is important to note that our abuse detection algorithms are tuned for high accuracy, meaning that they miss less obvious abuse. They are also limited when it is not clear at whom the abuse is aimed, and when abuse cannot be detected automatically – such as threats embedded in images, videos and GIFs, which are characteristics of much of the abuse that the journalists receive. Consequently, the samples of online abuse extracted using this method are considered to be severely under-reported, capturing only around 50% of all English-language abuse present in the target's social media stream, according to previous studies.⁵

After excluding tweets in the primary dataset authored by Ferial Haffajee, and retweets of her tweets by others, we closely examined the 51,856 tweets directed at her during the period. Of these, 6,656 were original tweets authored by other people: 15,398 were replies to Ferial, and 17,886 were replies to other people, leaving 11,916 tweets which were retweets of tweets by other users.

Of the retrospective collection of tweets relating to Haffajee spanning the earlier time period, after excluding the 9,093 tweets authored by her, and retweets of her tweets by others, there were 69,620 tweets directed at her. Of these, 10,167 were original tweets authored by other people: 17,013 were replies to Ferial, and 22,566 were replies to other people, leaving 19,874 tweets which were retweets of tweets by other users.

Of the retrospective collection of tweets relating to van Wyk, after excluding the 2,672 tweets authored by her, and retweets of her tweets by others, there were 47,760 tweets directed at her. Of these, 5,291 were original tweets authored by other people: 12,342 were replies to van Wyk, and 21,717 were replies to other people, leaving 18,410 tweets which were retweets of tweets by other users.

Our analysis of the data is conducted both on original tweets, and on a combination of original tweets and retweets, in order to understand how abusive tweets may be shared more widely through retweeting. All figures and statistics in this report refer to original tweets only, unless otherwise specified.

More than 92% of the posts contained within all three datasets were in English, with the remainder in a variety of languages. However, the English language tweets contain a number of Afrikaans slang terms and phrases which we interpreted and analyzed. The NLP tools deployed to examine the dataset include an English rule-based abuse classifier developed to distinguish between abusive and non-abusive tweets, the target of the abuse (whether it was aimed at the journalist in question or someone else), and various characteristics of the abuse (e.g. whether the abuse was political, racist, sexist, sexually explicit, etc.). Abusive terms are only matched in the text when they occur in a relevant way (just the presence of an abusive word is not enough to signify abuse towards the journalist; rather,

5 See G. Gorrell, M. Greenwood, I. Roberts, D. Maynard, K. Bontcheva. Twits, Twats and Twaddle: Trends in Online Abuse towards UK Politicians. In Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on Web and Social Media, 25-28 June 2018, Stanford, US.

the context is taken into account and only abuse directed at the journalist in question, including via replies to other users, is considered relevant). As discussed above, we know our high-accuracy methods significantly under-report abuse. As a result, in this study we refer to the abusive messages that our tools detected as “clearly abusive tweets”. This underscores the importance of our mixed methods approach, which includes synthesizing big data analysis with parallel qualitative data collection and analysis undertaken in South Africa and internationally.

After completing the NLP analysis, our partners at The Nerve⁶ undertook network analysis and topic clustering on the prevalent abusive accounts to determine interconnections and the distribution pattern of the abuse, which can indicate levels of coordination. Natural language processing was applied to the abusive tweets mentioning the journalists and the specified trigger tweets which were pulled through the Twitter API. The analysts used an NLP tool that leverages noun phrases or collocations (series of words that occur frequently together) in order to infer topic clusters. These noun phrases or collocations become candidates for the algorithm’s topic selection by frequency of occurrence within their cluster, where those prevalently occurring within the local cluster are chosen to represent the underlying topic.

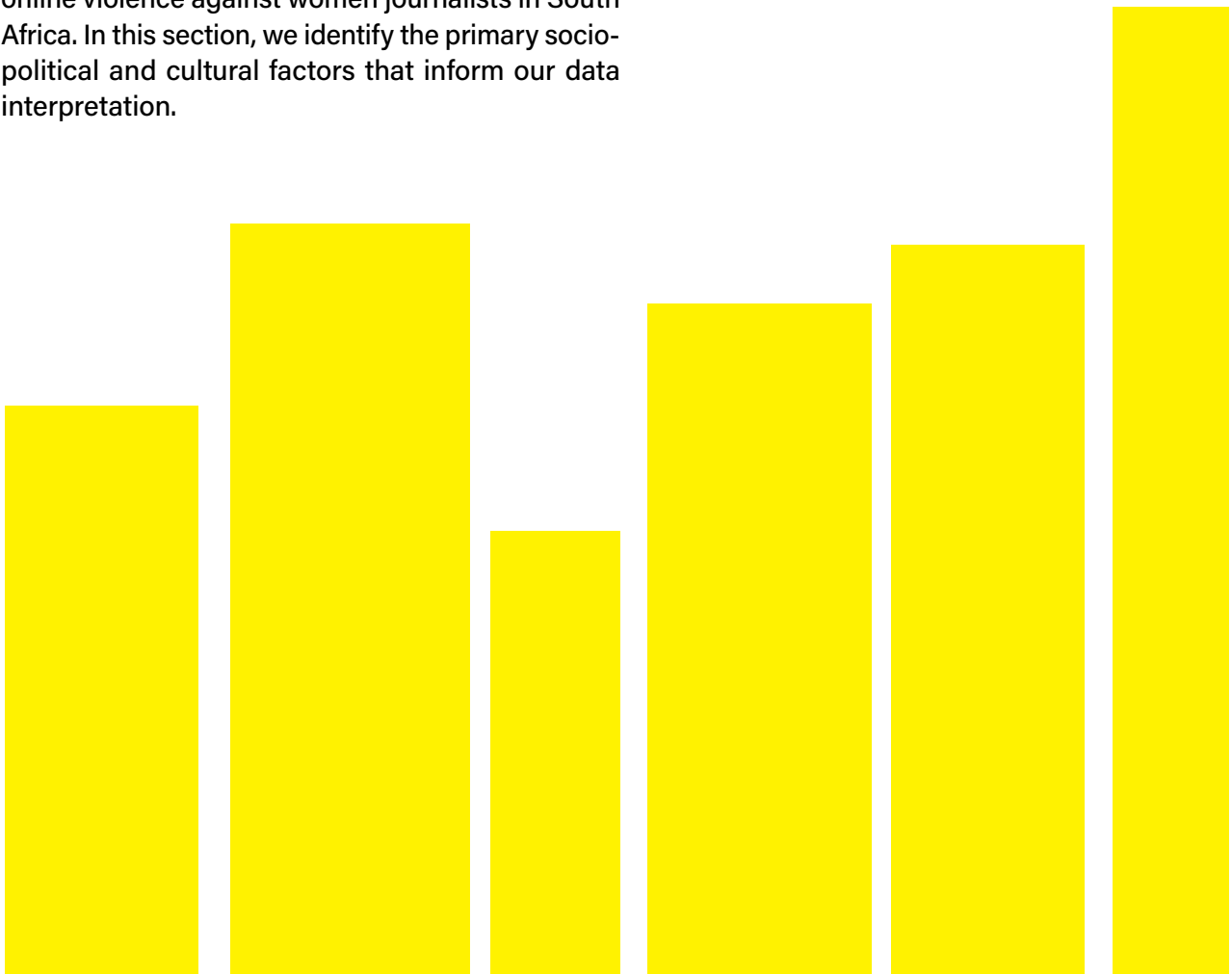
Finally, we mapped a timeline of online violence escalation which situated the self-reported abuse, in the context of abuse spikes detected in the data. This allows us to see escalation points where online violence risks becoming offline harm.

6 The Nerve is a digital forensics lab founded in 2018 by Nobel Laureate Maria Ressa.

3

THE CONTEXT

Before analyzing our Twitter dataset in detail, it is important to understand the context for the online violence against women journalists in South Africa. In this section, we identify the primary socio-political and cultural factors that inform our data interpretation.



3.1 A culture of misogyny and prejudice toward the LGBTIQ+ community

Veteran television anchor Jane Dutton worked abroad for media outlets including the BBC, CNN, CNBC and Al Jazeera until she returned to South Africa in 2018 to front an evening news and current affairs show on the local channel, eNCA. After her return she [expressed](#) how appalled she was at how women reporters are treated in South Africa:

Twitter is our enemy. The hatred expressed on it towards women is real. It comes from a deep-seated, sick, racist and sexist society... What makes it worse is that parties, like the EFF [the populist Economic Freedom Fighters], are often behind these threats. For their supporters it is a thumb's up to pick up the mantle. It shows how women are still perceived in this society – that it's ok to threaten women with death and rape.

The increasing trend of online violence against women journalists in South Africa ought first to be viewed within the overall context of the endemic misogyny and gender-based violence (GBV) prevalent within the country, as well as a culture of prejudice toward the LGBTIQ+ community.

[According to the World Health Organization](#), South Africa reflects one of the highest rates of violence inflicted on women and girls globally, where 51% of women say they have experienced GBV, and 76% of men admit to perpetrating GBV at one stage in their lives. [Quarterly crime statistics](#) regularly reflect that within each 3-month period, close to 900 women are murdered, over 1,400 are victims of attempted murder, and over 10,000 women and children are raped.

The threat of rape, physical violence, and murder is a daily lived reality for most South African women. Therefore, when women journalists receive rape and death threats via social media, such threats are not perceived to be 'online only' or remote threats; they are a very legitimate danger to the journalist and they are perceived as such.

The high incidence of GBV – online and offline – within the country is indicative and symptomatic of an overarching culture of misogyny, which regularly surfaces in the character and content of social media attacks on women journalists. Even when online assailants hide behind the anonymity afforded by the platforms, a political goal can often be discerned, which is frequently linked to and justified by [patriarchal and sexist ideologies that condone the abuse of women](#).

The experiences of News24 political reporter Tshidi Madia serves as an example. Madia reports on politics, and has received gendered intimidation and harassment on social media stemming from a variety of politicians and their supporters. Several male politicians have questioned her credibility and journalistic skills via social media because she is a woman, and she has been body shamed online as a response to her critical reporting. She [attributes this](#) to working in a country where chauvinism and patriarchy are still the norm.

Daily Maverick's Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic notes that while male journalists regularly receive insults or derogatory messages online in response to their work, the character of the comments received by women journalists is remarkably different, Davis said.

It's much more threatening. Much more physically threatening. You know, I don't have anybody threatening me physically, but people basically in the post throwing insults, trying to prove that I am a gangster or racist or whatever else. But nobody says, I'm going to kill you. So that's the difference. Nobody tried to threaten me with rape ever. If you are a troll, you can easily threaten any female journalist with rape. So, this element of gender-based violence is underlying everything; every single attack is much more threatening and much more dangerous for female journalists.

Apart from threats of physical violence or rape, *Daily Maverick* investigative journalist Rebecca Davis told researchers that the expertise and credibility of women reporters is also derided more frequently by online commentators than that of their male counterparts. Davis said: "I find that my male colleagues get a far easier ride. I'm not claiming that this is unique... It certainly does happen to all journalists, male or female to some degree, but I definitely think there is more skepticism towards the expertise of female journalists when writing on any subject."

Abuse at the intersection of misogyny and homophobia is also a significant feature of attacks on women journalists working for *Daily Maverick*. Brkic notes that sexist and misogynistic abuse is layered, and compounded with homophobic abuse when a woman journalist targeted is lesbian. "There's also a lot of homophobia. Out of my seven top editors, six of them are females. And then three of them are lesbian. There's a lot of that (homophobia) underlying the attacks."



FIGURE 1: A 2020 tweet by South African writer and media strategist, Pinky Khoabane, directed at Rebecca Davis (@becsplanb) which makes reference to her sexual orientation.

Rebecca Davis, who has the Twitter handle '@becsplanb', regards an LGBTIQ identity as an additional beating stick which trolls use to target women journalists in South Africa.

It's not something that I particularly highlighted about my personal identity in my online posts. Not that I conceal it, but I'm not a gay rights activist. I wasn't out there every day tweeting about being gay. I think the most memorable insult I ever received, which sadly is probably going to stay with me till I die, is that I was a 'rug munching cunt with a wasted Oxford education'. And you know, it goes on and on... So, I think it is definitely an additional stick to beat with.

3.2 State capture and corruption as drivers of online abuse

In South Africa the term 'State capture' is popularly used to refer to systemic political corruption where private and corporate actors significantly influence or direct the State's decision-making process to their own benefit or advantage. The practice of State capture became entrenched within the South African political system during Jacob Zuma's presidency between 2009 and 2018. A number of actors from the private sector were involved in State capture with varying degrees of influence over government processes, the most prominent amongst these being the wealthy Gupta family, which led the Oakbay Investments group of companies and is India-based.

The South African news media's reporting on suspicious links between the Guptas and then-President Zuma, his family members, and leading members of the African National Congress (ANC) governing party picked up speed from 2013 onward, and in 2016, it dominated the local news cycle.

As the corrupt relationship between the Guptas and the State became increasingly evident, then-Public Protector Thuli Madonsela investigated the matter, subsequently publishing her '[State of Capture](#)' report in November 2016. This explained how the Gupta family's commercial interests were intricately linked to the South African government and amounted to State control. This report, along with the publicity surrounding the closure of the family's bank accounts by all major banks, [increased the pressure on the Gupta family](#). In response, the family embarked on a digitally focused public relations campaign in an attempt to change the narrative about its involvement in State affairs and to this end, employed the services of disgraced British public relations firm Bell Pottinger.

The task given to Bell Pottinger was to create a focused multimedia campaign to divert attention away from the State capture allegations. To legitimize the Gupta family's reputation in the eyes of the South African public, the company leveraged both local and foreign media by packaging the narrative into material that could be widely distributed. [The campaign disseminated disinformation](#) using websites, social media posts, and a paid Twitter troll army that targeted journalists, businesspeople, and politicians with derogatory messages and manipulated photographs in order to deter and frustrate their investigations.

The troll network's development was first noticed in November 2016, with the initial main disinformation narrative appearing to be that the former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela's "State of Capture" report was inaccurate and prejudiced. A data analyst, Jean le Roux, [found roughly 100 accounts](#) that were tweeting about this specific topic and concluded that many of the accounts were automated (tweeting identical messages seconds apart), and controlled by "seeding" accounts that were feeding the content for retweets.

The campaign's most damaging aspect was an [unprecedented online bombardment](#) targeting journalists and others who had played a key part in uncovering State capture. Bell Pottinger built a complex network of fake social media profiles to harass critics and shape the political discourse by driving a narrative that portrayed the Guptas and Zuma in a positive light. They [used a variety of methods](#), including [false Twitter accounts](#) and [hate-filled articles published online](#), as well as newspapers and television news stations affiliated with (if not captured by) the Zuma/Gupta network.

Astroturfing prevailed, involving the use of bots to spread well-directed misinformation and propaganda with the aim of simulating organic public reaction.⁷

Daily Maverick's investigations were central to the exposure of the scandal known as #GuptaLeaks. Editor Brkic said women reporters were subject to the most virulent of the online attacks during the Bell Pottinger campaign because, firstly, most of South Africa's top investigative journalists are women, and secondly, because the troll army deemed women to be soft targets:

The Guptas brought in Bell Pottinger to weaponize social media in South Africa to their own advantage. And... the reality is that most of the investigative journalists and most of the top journalists in South Africa are female. So that adds to the dimension of gender-based attacks.

A few months after the initiation of Bell Pottinger's Gupta campaign in January 2017, *Daily Maverick* Associate Editor Ferial Haffajee (then Editor-at-Large at the now-defunct HuffPost South Africa) [revealed that](#) she and other journalists who had written extensively on State capture had become the targets of what we would define as online violence on Twitter.

Many abusive tweets came from Twitter accounts that had been intentionally set up to look credible: they appropriated the names of reputable news organizations with only minor changes to the names, presumably so that at first glance it would appear as if the tweet stemmed from an actual news outlet (for example, "@HuffingtonPostZA"). At the time [Haffajee said](#), "This weekend's campaign was actually hashtagged #Oakbay so it wasn't too difficult to surmise where it is from."

Bell Pottinger's involvement in the Gupta campaign was [quickly uncovered and exposed by investigative journalists](#) and *Daily Maverick's* Marianne Thamm was key among them. [As a result of the scandal](#), the public relations firm was abandoned by many of its clients, expelled from the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) for breaches of ethical practice, went bankrupt and collapsed.

After facing immense pressure from the ANC to step down or face a vote of no confidence, Jacob Zuma [resigned as President in 2018](#),⁸ the Gupta family fled the country to Dubai, and the [Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture](#) (otherwise called the Zondo Commission) was established and commenced its work.

Nonetheless, many of South Africa's most prominent journalists had suffered a barrage of online attacks during the Bell Pottinger campaign, and the most severe abuse was received by Ferial Haffajee. Unlike her male colleagues, the character of the Twitter abuse which Haffajee endured was highly sexualized and misogynistic. Haffajee was the first woman journalist in the country to be the target of a major coordinated campaign of online violence. Since 2016, other South African women journalists have suffered similar online abuse via Twitter. Sadly, the Bell Pottinger campaign provided a playbook for other nefarious actors on how to troll women journalists on Twitter.

While the Bell Pottinger saga was the first large-scale orchestrated Twitter attack against a woman journalist, online violence has continued to stem from political actors when women journalists report on State capture or corruption.

7 Astroturfing is the act of attempting to create the appearance of extensive grassroots support for an idea, person, or product when, in reality, there is none. Multiple internet identities and fictitious pressure groups are deployed to deceive the public into thinking that the astroturfer's perspective [enjoys popular support](#).

8 After refusing to participate in a national corruption enquiry in 2021, Jacob Zuma received a 15-month sentence for contempt of court but was released from prison on medical parole after only two months. Shortly before the 2024 national elections he split from the ANC and became the leader of the newly formed uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) party and he is once again running for president.

While South Africa has not witnessed the assassination of an investigative journalist, the prevalence of assassinations of whistle-blowers and investigators is an indicator of the threat environment in which journalists who investigate government corruption work. As this report was being prepared for publication, South Africa was gearing up for a highly contested national election, and as we know from previous research, the threats and abuse directed at journalists routinely increases closer to the elections.

These risks also need to be understood in the context of a sharp increase in the assassination of whistle-blowers and investigators in South Africa since 2020. For example, Babita Deokaran was a corruption whistle-blower with the Gauteng Department of Health who raised the alarm about irregular and dubious payments. [She was assassinated](#) outside of her home in August 2021. In the wake of the Zondo Commission, insolvency specialist Cloete Murray was tasked with recovering corruption-acquired assets. [He was fatally shot](#) in his car together with his son, Thomas Murray, in March 2023. Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) investigator Mandla Mahlangu's hitman was paid ZAR50,000 to kill him in March, 2020, while he was [probing high-profile cases against several police officers](#), including one involving suspended acting police commissioner Khomotso Phahlane. South African Police Service Colonel Frans Mathipa [was assassinated](#) in August 2023 while investigating the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Andre De Ruyter, the former CEO of Eskom (South Africa's main electricity supplier), was attempting to root out corruption at the power utility. In 2022 he was poisoned with cyanide while at work but [survived the assassination attempt](#).

3.3 The African National Congress (ANC) party

There is ample evidence to show that the naming and targeting of journalists online leads to further harassment and intimidation by political party supporters, sometimes physical or in the form of death threats.

- South African National Editors' Forum, 2021

High-ranking members of the ANC party who occupy positions in government or State institutions have frequently been investigated by journalists for corruption, maladministration or poor decision making, both during Zuma's presidency and in the years thereafter. Frustrated by regular exposes on corruption and critique, both the ANC party and its members have developed an often-contentious relationship with the news media, reacting by resorting to the harassment of journalists, both physically and on social media.

For example, in 2019 television journalist Jane Dutton reported on the ANC's position on sexual abuse. [Afterward she stated](#), "It prompted all sorts of threats... It seems that many South Africans are not open to debate sensitive or political topics, especially with a woman. The hideous trolls drown out the wonderful, dynamic and progressive things happening here."

In a 2018 incident, journalist Qaanitah Hunter, a political editor at News24, reported on the alleged plans of ex-President Zuma and his allies to oust current President Cyril Ramaphosa. Several ANC bodies, and notably [the ANC Women's League](#), quickly issued

comments criticizing the report as fake. On this occasion, Hunter was sent threatening messages from the Secretary General of the ANC Women's League, Meokgo Matuba, who sent a picture of a gun to Hunter's cellphone as a thinly veiled death threat.

It was not an isolated threat from the ANCWL. In 2021, ANCWL President Bathabile Dlamini [launched a Twitter attack on Hunter](#) after she reported on the topics discussed at a meeting of the ANCWL's national working committee:

Taking to Twitter – a social media platform that has become synonymous with the most vitriolic and atrocious attacks against mainly women journalists – the ANCWL president, who has 22,600 followers on Twitter, accused Hunter of deliberately ‘spreading lies’ and being ‘bankrolled’ by a ‘Master’ to ‘destroy the ANC.’ Her tweets further refer to Hunter as ‘misogynistic’ [sic] and ‘an insult to the struggle for women’s emancipation’ and further labelled her as an ‘information peddler.’

Currently, the ANC is highly factionalized. The discord within the party already resulted in physical violence when in July 2021 large scale civil unrest claimed over 350 lives and saw unprecedented looting, bloodshed, and the wide-scale destruction of infrastructure and businesses. [The report](#) from the [Expert Panel on the 2021 civil unrest](#) identified the internal battles in the ANC as a main contributor to the violence. A different [independent study by the Government and Public Policy \(GAPP\) think tank](#) found that South Africa has now entered a period of ongoing violent instability due to the ANC's internal tensions, and editor Brkic said he is worried about the implications for the 2024 election.

Brkic believes that the possibility of online attacks on journalists spilling over into physical violence is high, a position which is echoed by the GAPP study. Referring to the attacks on journalists stemming from the ANC and its members, Brkic said: “..my biggest worry right now is that we’ve been incredibly lucky so far that everything stayed in a kind of verbal space. But if [it] jumps over [into physical violence], I can see the hellfire.”

3.4 The populist politics of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)

Malema is a general and Twitter is his army of 2.4 million followers.

- Haffajee, 2019

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) is the third largest political party in South Africa. It was founded by former African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) President Julius Malema and his allies after he was expelled by the ANC in 2013. Posing as a far-left pan-Africanist party, the populist tactics of the EFF have seen the party accused of fomenting xenophobia, sexism, misogyny, anti-white and anti-Indian sentiment.

Similar to the ANC, the EFF and its highest-ranking members are frequently investigated by journalists for corruption and fraud. However, while the EFF is not the only group to initiate online violence against journalists whose reporting they believe paints them in a

negative light, the EFF's online content and influence is [especially damaging and vitriolic](#), as Ferial Haffajee said [in 2019](#):

The EFF leadership and supporter base have become the country's leading army of cyber-violence as it executes an information war... For years, the EFF has used social media and its rallies to execute a campaign of violence and hate speech against journalists whose reporting it does not approve of.

According to Brkic, the EFF and its supporters are "probably the most vicious" center of online attacks against women journalists in South Africa and "behave toward journalists literally like the Taliban."

The danger posed to women journalists by the EFF extends to physical threats. Women journalists, including Haffajee, have become hesitant to attend EFF events or press conferences out of fear for their personal safety. For example, in 2020 eNCA reporter Nobesuthu Hejana was physically harassed by EFF supporters during a live broadcast while covering a protest. An EFF member of parliament responded by [defending the actions of the EFF protesters](#), tweeting that their physical jostling of Hejana did not amount to harassment.

The South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) [responded in 2020](#):

While it is unacceptable for anyone to be touching another person without their consent, in a country like ours, with alarming cases of gender based violence, it is horrifying that a member of parliament finds it okay for a group of men to be harassing a woman. It is equally horrific that Ndlozi⁹ thinks it is okay to tell women what constitutes harassment.

During a live media conference outside the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Julius Malema [singled out then-journalist Ranjeni Munusamy](#), accusing her of being part of an "Indian cabal," a "politician," and lacking in journalistic credibility. Some weeks later as Munusamy exited a Johannesburg supermarket she found a group of men she did not know waiting for her, who then shouted verbal abuse at her. The content of their abuse led her to believe that they were EFF supporters. [Munusamy also received a barrage of online abuse from EFF supporters.](#)

"One of the consequences of Mr Malema's election to single me out is that every time he publicly attacks me, my Twitter account is flooded with abusive and threatening tweets from his supporters," [Munusamy said](#). "I've been called a 'witch', a 'cunt', a 'snake', an 'achhaar-eating¹⁰ bitch' and a 'street girl', was told to 'go hang' and have been accused of being a racist. I have also been told I should be 'fucked in the arse to be taught a lesson.'" Referring to the EFF, [Munusamy said](#), "They have made us [journalists] public enemy number one."

During her time as a journalist (she has now left the profession), Munusamy stopped covering EFF rallies or gatherings, and avoided writing about the party [as a direct result of the abuse she received from the EFF and its supporters.](#)

9 Mbuyiseni Ndlozi is a member of Parliament and a prominent leader within the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) opposition party.

10 Achaar is a pickled food, typically made in South Asia, where fruits and vegetables are preserved in wine, vinegar or oil.

Apart from launching online attacks and posing physical threats to women journalists, the EFF and its supporters have also [doxxed the journalists targeted](#), a practice that escalates the threat of offline harm. In March 2019 Julius Malema doxxed journalist Karima Brown (who [died in 2021](#)), publishing her cellphone number on Twitter. At the time, he had approximately 2.3 million followers. In his tweet Malema claimed that Brown was “sending moles” to an EFF event. The EFF released a statement the next day stating that Brown was an ANC operative and not a credible journalist. The EFF also published a message on its Facebook page, reiterating the allegations that Brown was a State agent and an ANC operative. Brown then experienced [a torrent of anonymous threatening phone calls and written threats on Twitter and WhatsApp](#), including hateful insults and threats of rape, assault, and death.

Malema also [frequently targets *Daily Maverick* journalist Pauli van Wyk with abuse](#), repeatedly calling her “Satan” on Twitter. On one occasion van Wyk shared an editorial that was critical of Malema, saying that the EFF leader “has to take responsibility for violence meted out to journalists. He is stoking the flames of a campaign against journalists whose work he disputes ... and ultimately endanger[s] the lives of journalists.” Malema responded by [tweeting](#): “You are sick, go to hell satan [sic].”

FIGURE 2: A 2019 tweet by EFF leader Julius Malema, in response to Van Wyk tweeting an editorial link to the Mail & Guardian.



In September 2018 van Wyk [published a story](#) outlining Julius Malema's money laundering and his role in the looting of the VBS Mutual Bank to the tune of at least R5.3 million (approximately \$286,000 US dollars).

“I wrote the first story on VBS. And it was chaos because I accused Floyd Shivambu and Julius Malema of taking some of the money. And they denied everything...” [van Wyk said](#).

“They just started attacking me and they said that I am trying to target them and that I should bring them proof... And the more I looked into it the more I found proof. And the more people came to me and said ‘you are right, here’s some proof.’ And I started working on some hypothesis that I had, and I could see the family links and I started asking questions. And it took me quite some time but I got answers to those questions. And, they are guilty as Hell.”

After the publication of van Wyk's 2018 investigation on the VBS scandal, Malema again [publicly called](#) van Wyk “Satan” on Twitter. Another of his tweets, which appeared to reference an 1838 massacre of Boers by the Zulu King Dingane, was interpreted by some as racially-infused incitement. While this tweet did not mention van Wyk, within the context of her exposé on Malema and because she has an Afrikaans surname [it was believed to be aimed at her](#). This tweet remains published on Twitter to this day.

Malema's Twitter followers and EFF supporters then took the cue from the party leader, and a torrent of online violence against van Wyk ensued. “I was looking at my phone and ... it was pinging blue, but it was pinging so fast that I had to sort of look very carefully and I thought it was some spoof or something because Julius Malema was tweeting me. And then I would see ‘Satan’ and ‘Wa phapha’ (you are too forward) and ‘The witch is burning’ Things like that. And in a rolling number of tweets,” [said van Wyk](#).

Van Wyk told researchers that during this Twitter onslaught, EFF/Malema supporters called for her to be raped in order to be 'taught a lesson' and called for her death, including via necklacing.¹¹

In November 2018 Malema delivered a speech to EFF supporters outside of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, in which he called for "heads to be cut off" and singled out a number of journalists whom he considered to be problematic. The journalists he identified by name, including two women journalists – Ferial Haffajee and Ranjeni Munusamy – subsequently received a barrage of online abuse from party leaders and supporters.

Following this torrent of abuse, the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) launched a court case against the EFF. SANEF asked the Equality Court to prohibit the party and its leaders from "using any platform, including social media, to intimidate, harass, threaten or assault journalists." A statement issued by SANEF said, "Women journalists in particular have borne the brunt of an avalanche of insults leveled against them, particularly on social media. The journalists who have reported critically on the EFF have been called 'whores,' 'witches,' 'bitches' and 'cunts,' and calls have been made for them to be raped and attacked by staunch EFF supporters."

As part of this case, in her affidavit Van Wyk said, "Since the publication of my articles [on the EFF's implication in the looting of the VBS bank], I have been subjected to a torrent of abuse and insults from EFF leadership and supporters. Much of the abuse constitutes hate speech."

During the court case the EFF argued that its public comments directed at journalists constituted legitimate criticism and not hate speech, and that the party could not be held responsible if persons purporting to be EFF supporters attacked journalists online.

SANEF subsequently lost the case against the EFF on jurisdictional grounds: the matter was heard in the Equality Court and not the High Court. Since then, the EFF's troll armies have continued their online violence against women journalists unabated.

3.5 Captured media

For the past 13 years a select group of South African media outlets have been affected by media capture, meaning that they are increasingly reliant on the State or business actors linked to political factions, in exchange for sympathetic or complicit reporting, eroding their independence from political interests, and in some cases being taken over by political interests. Among other impacts, this has resulted in online violence campaigns against competitor journalists and outlets.

For example, in 2010 the Guptas launched the *New Age* newspaper, and in 2013 they launched the African News Network 7 (ANN7) TV news channel. Both of these outlets were famously sympathetic toward then-President Jacob Zuma. Later, when testifying before the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, Zuma admitted that the establishment of the *New Age* and ANN7 were his idea. At the same commission, ANN7's former editor, Rajesh Sundaram, testified that Zuma was actively involved in the running of the now-defunct news channel.

¹¹ Necklacing is a form of extrajudicial summary execution and torture used during South Africa's apartheid period by black communities to punish members believed to be collaborators with the apartheid government or police informers. It involved placing a rubber tire filled with petrol around the victim's neck, and setting the tire alight, which often resulted in the death of the victim.

Also in 2013, the Sekunjalo Independent Media Consortium (SIM) chaired by Iqbal Survé, who has openly declared his closeness to the ANC and Jacob Zuma, concluded its purchase of Cape Town-based Independent News & Media SA (INMSA), renaming it Independent Media. This media group owns some of South Africa's oldest newspapers.

All 16 titles in the group have seen a near total collapse in circulation since Survé bought out the group, owing in part to a dearth of editorial independence. When faced with critique, Survé and his cohort of loyal editors and journalists regularly lash out by publicly attacking the credibility of other media outlets, both in articles published in Independent Media titles and on Twitter. For example, in 2019 Rampedi started a virulent Twitter thread in which he attacked the credibility of several journalists working in competing media houses, Ferial Haffajee of *Daily Maverick* included. This incident resulted in a torrent of online violence aimed at Haffajee and other journalists.

Independent Media has also frequently launched institutional attacks on the *Daily Maverick*, and its Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic. In November 2021 Sekunjalo Investment Holdings announced that it would be suing various media houses (including *Daily Maverick*), because "some of their journalists, several academics, and media commentators, as well as specific individuals who have made it their mission to disparage and undermine the reputation and value of Sekunjalo and its related entities."

In November 2023, *Daily Maverick* columnist and Associate Professor of Media Studies at Wits University, Glenda Daniels, wrote an opinion piece for *Daily Maverick* in which she critiqued the management of Independent Media, the ongoing decline in the financial sustainability of the company, the lack of editorial independence in its titles, and journalistic job losses amongst its outlets. In response, Independent Media published two scathing critiques of Daniels, both on its main website (IOL.co.za) and in two of its biggest titles, the *Sunday Independent* and the *Dispatch*. These articles questioned Daniels' credibility, claimed that she was deliberately spreading disinformation, and were littered with insults, calling her work "lies" and "drivel." Independent Media then mobilized the Twitter accounts of all of its media outlets to post the same or very similar tweets regarding the matter, aimed at discrediting Daniels by using the hashtags, for example, #FakeJournalism, #Misleading, #UnethicalReporting, and #FalseNarrative.

Independent Media and its CEO, Takudzwa Hove, called Daniels' opinion piece false and defamatory, and demanded that *Daily Maverick* publish a retraction and apology while also mentioning that failure to do so would prompt legal action. Daniels sought assistance from SANEF which then responded on her behalf (Daniels is also the current SANEF Secretary General). SANEF highlighted that while Daniels' article was clearly marked as an opinion piece, the facts to which it referred are openly available in the public domain. SANEF further requested that Independent Media desist from using its own publication channels, including articles published by its outlets and their social media accounts, to engage in a vilification of Daniels arguing that this may prompt the harassment of women journalists. At the time of writing it is still not clear whether Independent Media intends to proceed with legal action against Daniels and/or the *Daily Maverick*.



FIGURE 3. A 2023 tweet by IOL News (@IOL), which is owned by Independent Media, targeting *Daily Maverick* columnist Glenda Daniels for her critical reporting on the media company. Similar tweets were posted by several other accounts owned by Independent Media, including *The Star* (@TheStar_news) and *Pretoria News* (@pretorianews).

According to *Daily Maverick* journalist Rebecca Davis:

The Independent group has probably been the greatest locus of attacks. They have published opinion pieces attacking me in a fairly ad hominem way on the basis of opinions I have penned about the Independent Group. In some ways it's a reasonable response to a criticism on my part, although it takes on a more personal level. They're entitled to reply to what you said, but then they just do it in a way that attacks your dignity and your person.

Further, she said that she views Independent Media as a "much greater threat" than Twitter trolls, "...simply because they do have the pseudo legitimacy of an established platform. The ease with which this kind of trolling has transcended the boundaries of social media into supposedly mainstream media is a real concern."

This interplay of social media troll armies and partisan or captured news media is a trend internationally, where journalists from these outlets instigate and stoke online violence against their competitors and critics of both their brand of 'journalism' and the political parties and narratives they support.¹²

3.6 Anti-vaxxers and the COVID-19 pandemic

From 2020 onward, anti-vaccination or anti-lockdown interest groups and conspiracy theorists became particularly vocal within South Africa, spreading mis- and disinformation about COVID-19 and attacking women journalists or women scientists who reported on, or talked about, the pandemic. The most prominent crowd in this regard was a private sector research group called Pandemics Data and Analytics (PANDA).

According to Branko Brkic, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a spike in online violence against women journalists stemming from anti-vaccine proponents and conspiracy theorists. "The anti-vaccine attacks grew in madness," said Brkic. "That's when people like Rebecca Davis, who exposed PANDA's duplicity, lies and PANDA's Trumpian playbook, got seriously attacked. I can almost claim that anti-vaccine attacks are probably even more crazy and more damaging than the attacks by the corrupt officials of the ANC."

Brkic theorized, however, that online violence against women journalists does not stem from one, or even a few, centers of origin, but instead spikes when triggered by a woman journalist's reporting on a wide variety of issues. "It's basically a whole spectrum of attacks. There's some nuance to how, why, and who is being attacked. It's not one faceless wave. It's actually several waves. Like a web of factors. Like a matrix."

In an interview for this case study, *Daily Maverick* journalist Rebecca Davis concurred:

With every new news event, there certainly is a new wave of abuse increasingly based on a kind of conspiratorial thinking. So, it's not, there's not necessarily a huge consistency. If there is a consistent thread, I would say it's just that women

¹² This trend has also been identified as a common indicator of online violence escalation in previous research published by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2023: <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/554098>

receive more abuse. But other than that, the various shapes it takes obviously differ depending on the news cycle.

Davis received online abuse stemming from anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown proponents during the pandemic, as other cases we have studied also indicate,¹³ and from the EFF. "I've been aware that some of the worst vitriol that I have seen has been, for instance, when I've criticized the EFF," says Davis.

Apart from this, Davis said she feels that she has a number of 'enemies' who actively seek the slightest opportunity to troll her:

I think I had sort of consistent enemies. There were clearly people out there who were waiting for the slightest opportunity to jump on things I said. In general, from what I've observed, the most abuse would come from articles about women, about feminism, about rape, about anything to do with women's matters. I think any kind of claimed expertise is viewed with more suspicion from a female journalist.

On this, Haffajee said:

It was the health and science journalists who really experienced it badly any time they put out information that a certain group of epidemiologists or anti-vaccine proponents didn't write. The harassment was 'through the roof bad' in the pandemic. And because those beats are still very much women-owned, it obviously had that gendered impact as well.

For example, Rebecca Davis co-authored a [feature article](#) which questioned the positions and information promulgated by PANDA. The latter responded with a torrent of vitriolic tweets, but also resorted to a slew of other measures, including laying a 30-page legalistic complaint with the Press Ombudsman ([the majority of the complaint was dismissed](#)), and publicly attacking Davis' credibility on several occasions.

"The PANDA group has earmarked me as some kind of persona non grata. Their pushback was unlike anything I've received in my journalistic career thus far," Davis told us. "And I think that's because the PANDA men — and they are almost all men — have a degree of education and resources that probably most online foes do not. So, they were able to write a 30-page legal affidavit to the Press Ombud and it tied me up for a long time. They continue to rubbish my name whenever they can."

13 See, for example, our Big Data Case Study on Carole Cadwalladr: <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/online-violence-big-data-case-studies>

Timeline: the evolution of online violence against women journalists at *Daily Maverick*

2012-2024

This timeline highlights the online violence identified within the context of South African political developments between 2012 and 2024, to provide evidence of the intertwining of political pressure points and spikes in online violence against journalists Ferial Haffajee, Rebecca Davis and Pauli van Wyk in the country.

2012

- **KEY ABUSE EVENT:** In May, the City Press newspaper publishes a picture of a painting, *The Spear*, depicting Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed. As the editor of City Press at the time, Haffajee is [attacked on Twitter](#), facing a barrage of lewd commentary about penises and her status as a single woman (see Section 4.1).

2013

- In August, the Gupta brothers launch the partisan African News Network 7 (ANN7) news channel in South Africa, which is carried on the DStv platform owned by Multichoice.

2016

- In March, as an anti-corruption movement gains momentum, President Zuma faces [mounting pressure](#). The Public Protector investigates allegations that the Gupta family and Zuma's son improperly influenced hiring of ministers and State firm directors, allowing Gupta-linked companies to profit from State contracts.
- Subsequently, the Guptas hire British public relations firm Bell Pottinger, to divert attention away from State capture.
- In November, outgoing Public Protector Thuli Madonsela publishes her final report, entitled '[State of Capture](#)', which outlines how the Gupta family's business interests are inextricably tied, and amount to, State capture. This report, [along with the publicity](#) surrounding the closure of the family's bank accounts by all of South Africa's major banks, increases the pressure on the Gupta family.
- The same month, Bell Pottinger launches a disinformation campaign to divert attention from State capture revelations. It [spreads disinformation](#) online and uses a paid Twitter army to attack journalists exposing State capture, particularly targeting prominent journalists like Haffajee.
- **KEY ABUSE EVENT:** On 4 December, Ferial Haffajee publishes a feature article titled "[4 days in December](#)" chronicling the removal of the finance minister and traces the history of claims that the Gupta family may have had a hand in some of President Jacob Zuma's ministerial appointments (see Section 4.2).
- **KEY ABUSE EVENT:** In December, Haffajee faces a new wave of Twitter attacks in response to her article on State capture allegations involving the Gupta family. The attacks use [digitally manipulated demeaning imagery](#) and are spread by [fake accounts linked to Bell Pottinger](#) (see Section 4.3).

2017

- In January, [it is revealed](#) that the Gupta family paid the now defunct Bell Pottinger PR firm GBP 100,000 a month since March 2016 to "repair and protect" the reputation of the Guptas and that of former president Jacob Zuma's son, with Zuma's approval.
- Gupta-owned Oakbay Investments [denies any involvement](#) in the Twitter campaign targeting its critics, saying it did not pay anyone to set up fake Twitter accounts. These denials are later confirmed to be false.

- In the days after the Bell Pottinger revelations, Ferial Haffajee [reveals publicly](#) that she and other journalists who had written extensively on State capture had been the targets of trolling on Twitter.
- In June, South African media outlets publish the [Gupta Leaks investigative reports](#), providing evidence of State capture by the Gupta network, exposing their corrupt relationships across government departments, contracts, ministers and officials to benefit their business interests.
- The Twitter army working for the Bell Pottinger campaign is [first identified](#) in September by analyst Jean le Roux, who finds roughly 100 accounts that are tweeting about the same topic. Many of the accounts are automated bots, programmed to automatically retweet all content published by other “seeding” accounts.

2018

- *Daily Maverick* journalist Rebecca Davis stops using Twitter. She has not tweeted since September 2018.
- **KEY EVENT:** In February, after facing [immense pressure from the ANC](#) to step down or face a vote of no confidence, Jacob Zuma resigns as President.
- **KEY ABUSE EVENT:** In September, *Daily Maverick* journalist Pauli van Wyk exposes EFF leaders Malema and Shivambu’s alleged money laundering and VBS bank looting. The EFF leadership and EFF supporters respond with online abuse, including death and rape threats until December 2018.
- **KEY ABUSE EVENT:** In November 2018, Pauli Van Wyk reported that Floyd Shivambu, South African politician and the incumbent Deputy President of the Economic Freedom Fighters, benefited from the VBS Mutual Bank scandal, in which his brother, Brian Shivambu, was involved.
- In November, van Wyk shares a *Mail & Guardian* editorial on her Twitter account, calling for Malema to take responsibility for violence against journalists triggered by his comments. Malema responds via Twitter calling van Wyk ‘Satan’ and references an 1838 massacre of Boers by the Zulu King Dingane, which is interpreted by some as incitement to racial hatred. *Daily Maverick* Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic [publishes an editorial](#) condemning the EFF’s “continuous vicious attack” which he describes as an act of “cowardice” and a threat to press freedom.
- Also in November, while attending the State capture Inquiry, Malema listed names of journalists and activists he claimed were a political opposition force. [He instructed EFF supporters](#) to “attend to them

decisively." The crowd turned hostile toward the only named journalist present, Haffajee, despite police presence. Malema had to calm supporters to prevent violence against her. After this, Haffajee faces frequent attacks from EFF troll armies.

2019

- In March, the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) and five journalists approach the Equality Court to try to stop Malema and the EFF from threatening, intimidating, harassing, or attacking journalists. van Wyk puts her name to the case, while [Haffajee elects not to join](#) the action.¹⁴ SANEF eventually [loses the court case](#) on jurisdictional grounds.
- The EFF's online harassment of journalists continues.
- Also in March, Haffajee publishes [a feature article](#), detailing the online violence directed at journalists by Malema and his EFF supporters. This article reveals that the EFF enjoys impunity, since all criminal cases laid against the EFF for violence against journalists have come to nought, owing in part to a lack of action on the part of the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA).
- Haffajee publishes [a second article](#) on the EFF which details the court case being launched against the party by SANEF, calling the EFF "the country's leading army of cyber violence" bent on carrying out an information war.
- In June, ANN7's former editor, Rajesh Sundaram, [testifies](#) at the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture and reveals that Jacob Zuma was actively involved in the running of the now-defunct Gupta-owned news channel, ANN7.
- Jacob Zuma, testifying at the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, [admits](#) that the establishment of the New Age and ANN7 by the Guptas was his idea.
- **KEY ABUSE EVENT:** In July, Independent Media's Piet Rampedi accuses prominent journalists, including Haffajee, of being part of a "media conspiracy" working with finance minister Gordhan, calling them an untrustworthy "cabal." Days later, Haffajee and other journalists face a torrent of Twitter attacks and are heckled and intimidated at the State Capture Inquiry.
- In August, Haffajee authors a reflective feature article describing the online violence which she has experienced stemming from multiple quarters and her response thereto. [In this detailed account](#) she highlights online violence as a threat to media freedom and declares Twitter's response to the violence as inadequate.

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14 Tiso Blackstar associate editor Ranjeni Munusamy; News24 Editor-in-Chief Adriaan Basson; EWN's Barry Bateman, and Vrye Weekblad editor Max du Preez also joined the action.

2020

- The onset of COVID-19 results in a spike in online violence against women journalists in South Africa writing about the pandemic. The abuse largely stems from anti-vaccine proponents and conspiracy theorists, especially from the Pandemics Data and Analytics (PANDA) group.

2021

- In February, Rebecca Davis co-authors [a feature article](#) questioning the positions and information promulgated by PANDA. The latter responds with a torrent of vitriolic tweets, but also resorts to other measures, including laying a 30-page legalistic complaint with the Press Ombudsman ([the majority which is dismissed](#)), and publicly attacking Davis' credibility.
- In June, after refusing to participate in a national corruption enquiry, Jacob Zuma received a 15-month sentence for contempt of court.
- In July, the so-called "Zuma riots" broke out in response to Zuma's imprisonment. Over 300 people were killed during the unrest and a month later, Zuma was released from prison on medical parole after serving only two months in jail.
- **KEY ABUSE SPIKES IN DATASET:** On 17 September and 17 October 2021 we found two of four spikes of abuse targeting Ferial Haffajee (in our primary dataset, collected specifically for this study, covering the period from 30 August 2021 and 1 March 2022 – see Figure 19). The first spike is in response to a [tweet](#) about a crime story. The latter tweet referred to Zuma being at a casino when on 'medical parole.'
- In November, Sekunjalo Investment Holdings, the leader of a consortium of owners of Independent Media, stated that it planned to [file lawsuits against multiple media organizations](#) (including *Daily Maverick*), certain journalists employed by those outlets, several academics, and media commentators. The company accused these parties of deliberately trying to damage Sekunjalo's reputation.

2022

- **KEY ABUSE EVENT IN DATASET:** There were 250 abusive tweets targeting Pauli Van Wyk from 7 to 24 February 2022. Based on existing tags, the majority of these abusive tweets were attacks on her credibility, and general abusive remarks.

- **KEY ABUSE SPIKES IN DATASET:** On 8 and 23 February 2022 we found two of four spikes of abuse targeting Ferial Haffajee (in our primary dataset – see Figure 19). The [first](#) spike is in response to a tweet about how it is ‘open season’ on women journalists, fanned by state harassment. The latter in response to her [tweet](#) about the country’s budget.
- **KEY ABUSE EVENT IN DATASET:** We see evidence of abuse related to the hashtag #WMC (“White Monopoly Capital,” popularized in the public discourse by Bell Pottinger in its 2016 Gupta-commissioned disinformation campaign) in both the main data collection and the back-fill collection, mostly accusing Ferial Haffajee and the *Daily Maverick* of lying and being unpatriotic Western agents. These terms continue to be used on Twitter to target journalists like Haffajee years later – including by former ANC spokesperson and vocal supporter of former President Jacob Zuma, [Carl Niehaus](#).

2023

- In November, *Daily Maverick* columnist Glenda Daniels publishes an opinion piece about the pro-Zuma Independent Media and critiques the ongoing decline in the financial sustainability of the company, the lack of its titles’ editorial independence, and journalistic job losses among its outlets.
- Three days later, Independent Media ran articles across its outlets questioning Daniels’ credibility and accusing her of spreading misinformation. The company then coordinated tweets from all its media accounts attacking Daniels’ credibility.

2024

- In April, Editor in Chief Branko Brkic reports an increase in online attacks on *Daily Maverick* as the outlet goes dark, [announcing it has shutdown](#) for a day to highlight the value of independent media.

4

COMPARATIVE
BIG DATA CASE STUDY:

Ferial Haffajee

The images bombarded Twitter for weeks. After the first distortions, they morphed into images of more destructive hate. There was an entire set of memes with me either on the lap of, in the bed of and on the desk of the billionaire Johann Rupert, who was the face of the family's campaign by the global PR company Bell Pottinger. Later, I was photoshopped onto a barely clothed dancer; then I was a busty cheerleader wearing a barely-there costume; then I was a dog being walked by Rupert and a cow being milked by him. A dog, a cow, a prostitute – the nasty purveyors of online hate could not get more stereotypically sexist.

- Haffajee, 2019

Haffajee has been the target of sustained online violence connected to her journalism for the past decade. The volume and intensity of the Twitter attacks against Haffajee, however, have spiked at four key moments over the past ten years. The four events which saw a period of increased online abuse directed at Haffajee are discussed below.

4.1 The City Press' art review of Brett Murray's 'The Spear'

In May, 2012 while Haffajee was editor of the *City Press*, the newspaper published an art review of a painting by South African artist Brett Murray entitled 'The Spear.' Known for his political and provocative work, Murray's painting depicts then-President Jacob Zuma in a similar stylistic manner to Soviet-era propagandistic depictions of Lenin, but with his genitals exposed. The image evoked the parable of the Emperor's New Clothes (or rather, a lack of clothes) while referencing the multiple sexual scandals in which Zuma had been involved in the preceding years.

The painting, and the *City Press'* review thereof, caused a national uproar. In an affidavit served to the *City Press* newspaper, [Zuma claimed to be shocked and disrespected by the painting](#). ANC supporters marched to the Goodman Gallery in protest. The painting itself was defaced by ANC supporters using red and black paint.

City Press reporters were threatened, prevented from attending a trade union meeting, and ANC supporters publicly burned copies of the newspaper. The ANC opened a court case against the Goodman Gallery and the City Press. Amid the furore, [Haffajee decided to remove the image of 'The Spear' from the City Press website](#).

Saying that the "atmosphere is like a tinderbox," Haffajee justified her decision to remove the image [by stating](#), "Out of care and as an olive branch to play a small role in helping turn around a tough moment, I have decided to take down the image... That we are now a symbol of a nation's anger and rage is never the role of the media in society... For any editor to respond to a threat to take down an article of journalism without putting up a fight is an unprincipled thing to do, so we've fought as much as we could... It doesn't serve City Press or South Africa to dig in our heels and put our fingers in our ears."

Despite this decision, Haffajee nonetheless became the target of online violence: "The art review caused the first Twitter storms and I was targeted as the hive of hate swarmed," [Haffajee said](#). "There was mayhem. I was scared. People knew where I lived. We didn't have the language to describe digital misinformation or disinformation!"

4.2 The Gupta-commissioned Bell Pottinger campaign

On 4 December 2016 Haffajee published a feature article titled "[4 days in December](#)." In the essay Haffajee pieces together and summarizes key moments in the media's chronicling of the State capture saga, as this played out within the year. The article recounted the removal of Nhlanhla Nene as finance minister over an infamous weekend in December 2015, and traced the history of claims that the Gupta family may have had a hand in some of then-President Zuma's ministerial appointments following the release of the Public Protector's report 'State of Capture' on the allegations.

On the day following the publication of this article, 6 December 2016, [a new spate of Twitter attacks on Haffajee began](#). These were posted by an army of fake accounts, using fake names and stock images as profile pictures. The campaign of online violence aimed at Haffajee was sustained for weeks thereafter.

This campaign invoked racialized rhetoric in an effort to argue that the real evil besetting the country lay not with the Guptas or Zuma, but rather in the unequal distribution of wealth between white and black South Africans. The term 'White Monopoly Capital' (hashtagged as #WMC) was used to try to divert scrutiny away from the Gupta/Zuma network toward then-minister of finance Pravin Gordhan and wealthy white businesspersons. The campaign attempted to discredit journalists who had reported on State capture, Haffajee included, as the 'minions' of the finance minister and a white-run corporate sector which only critiqued Zuma and the Guptas in their reporting due to nefarious reasons; thus implying that the Guptas and Zuma were the innocent victims of a malicious conspiracy carried out in part by independent news outlets. Journalists were thus positioned as malevolent and untrustworthy by this campaign.

The targeted Twitter attacks against Haffajee included the dissemination of **digitally manipulated imagery** from popular Hollywood films, depicting her in a highly sexualized manner, including doctored images of her in sexually suggestive positions together with businessman Johann Rupert.

FIGURE 4: A 2017 tweet featuring a digitally manipulated image depicting Haffajee lying in bed with South African businessman, Johann Rupert, from the poster for the US film *Good Luck Chuck* (2007); and a cheapfake image depicts Haffajee in his lap in a digitally manipulated stock photo which was circulated on Twitter in January 2018.



Her image was manipulated to cast aspersions on her moral character; her face was digitally imposed onto images of a dog (being walked by the businessman Johann Rupert), a cow (being milked by Rupert), a prostitute, a woman baring her breasts in public, a member of a cabaret chorus line, and in a number of suggestive sexual positions – either in bed with Rupert or sitting on his lap. Such tweets regularly included the pernicious hashtag #presstitute, which is widely used in Global South contexts to target women journalists online.

It was later discovered that the fake accounts harassing Haffajee were **orchestrated by Bell Pottinger and aligned to the Gupta family network**.



FIGURE 5: [Left] A digitally manipulated image of Haffajee, originally from the poster for the film *Exit*, distributed via Twitter in June 2017, depicting her in a sexually suggestive manner and making use of the term 'presstitute' [middle]; a digitally manipulated image from a 2009 US TV series called *Hot Sluts* depicts Haffajee as a member of a chorus line in a sexually suggestive manner. This image appeared on Twitter in December 2016; [right] a 2017 tweet featuring a digitally manipulated, sexually suggestive image of Haffajee on the poster for the 1996 film *Striptease*.

The tweets appeared to come from established media houses and journalists, but closer inspection revealed subtle changes to their names or titles. The accounts [were registered as 'parody'](#), so while the persons/organizations who are the subject of the impersonation could complain, the creators of such accounts were afforded a degree of protection in terms of Twitter's historic take-down policies. This was and still is a popular way for Twitter abusers to claim cover.

In an interview for the *Section 16 documentary*, *Daily Maverick* journalist Pauli van Wyk recalls the Twitter onslaught, saying: "I remember at the time we saw something strange. Organized groups. It looked to us like organized groups attacking us with the same sentences and often with the same spelling mistakes."

[Research later revealed](#) that the bot army only retweeted itself (in an attempt at astroturfing) and that only three authentic accounts spread its content.

Many journalists and media commentators [began to voice their suspicions](#) that an orchestrated Twitter campaign was operating within South Africa and was somehow connected to the Guptas. But in January 2017, Gupta-owned Oakbay Investments denied any involvement in the Twitter campaign targeting its critics, saying that it did not set up, or pay any company or individual to set up, fake Twitter accounts. Oakbay maintained that any suggestion that it did so is evidence that some media outlets were biased against Oakbay.

These denials were later confirmed to be entirely false. A series of exposés which came to be known as the #Guptaleaks was published by a team of investigative journalists from a number of media outlets working in collaboration (see www.gupta-leaks.com). The leaks revealed that Bell Pottinger, *Daily Maverick* included, created and managed the campaign on behalf of Oakbay Investments. The report was informed by a cache of leaked emails that exposed the extent of the Gupta family's involvement in State capture. Part of what was uncovered during this investigative process was evidence of a conspiracy of disinformation, orchestrated by the Guptas and carried out by Bell Pottinger: [this part of the State capture story](#) was broken by *Daily Maverick* journalist Marianne Thamm.

Throughout the Bell Pottinger campaign Haffajee became the first woman South African journalist to be the target of large-scale orchestrated online violence. She would not be the last and the online violence did not end with the collapse of Bell Pottinger. In a 2020 [panel discussion on the threat of online violence](#), she said:

I'm a passionate South African journalist because I was a reporter under apartheid. I witnessed the freedom years and all its hope. And then I have witnessed also the 10 years of the kleptocracy of our former president, Jacob Zuma. I was very much part of uncovering that, of writing about it. It's a system that we call State capture... from what we know now is that it was the work of a very famous and now defunct, thank God, PR company called Bell Pottinger. But what it did teach me is that these are organized trolling armies, very often by public relations companies. And since then, I mean, it's gone on and on and on.

4.3 The Economic Freedom Fighters

If you know that somebody has an army of trolls pushing their points on Twitter, it means that they're doing something wrong. That's really important to understand.

- Branko Brkic, 2020

In November 2018, Julius Malema delivered a speech to a gathering of EFF supporters outside the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture. Ferial Haffajee was in attendance. In his speech, Malema listed the names of journalists and activists whom he believed to be operating as part of an opposing political force.

Malema told his supporters to write down the names of the persons whom he had listed and to “attend to them decisively.” Haffajee and others interpreted this as an instruction to EFF supporters to attack the identified critics of the party, either online or physically.

Malema said, “Let’s attack, fighters. Let’s occupy every street; every house; every space in society. Let us not leave the enemy to chance. Where we meet the enemy, we must crush the enemy. On Facebook, Twitter, social media, be there, guard the revolution. When the enemy raises its ugly head, don’t hit the head, cut the head. No time to entertain enemies of the revolution. We must protect the revolution at all costs.”

Haffajee was the only journalist from those named by Malema to be present during the speech. The EFF crowd then became hostile toward Haffajee in spite of the two lines of police officers brought in to secure the precinct around the commission of inquiry. Malema himself then had to placate the crowd so that things would not turn violent against Haffajee.

In the wake of this incident, Haffajee became a frequent target of the EFF’s troll armies, saying, “I’m roadkill, not an equal of Malema’s and other trolling armies, because they have impacted on me. The images of the Bell Pottinger campaign, the words of Piet and of Malema’s trolling army fill me with shame.”

4.4 Piet Rampedi and his media ‘cabal’

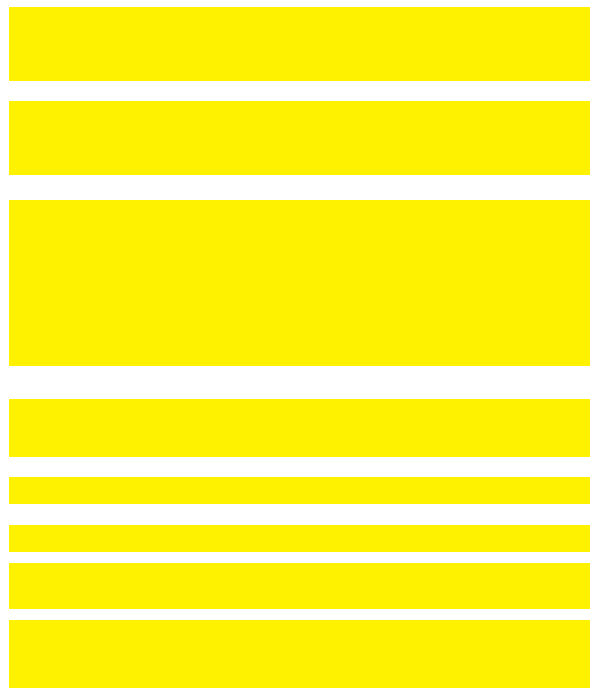
In July 2019, a former colleague of Haffajee and Independent Media journalist, Piet Rampedi, started a Twitter thread disparaging Haffajee and other journalists, the content of which was strikingly similar to the messaging disseminated by Bell Pottinger’s troll army during the Gupta campaign.

Rampedi took to Twitter to accuse a number of journalists of being part of a “media conspiracy,” working with finance minister Gordhan, making unproven accusations of media capture implicating some of the country’s most experienced journalists and publishers, Brkic, *Daily Maverick* and Haffajee among them. Rampedi claimed that the group of journalists on his list were all a part of what he called a “cabal,” who by his judgment were part of a narrative of disinformation and not to be trusted.

Haffajee then faced a renewed torrent of Twitter attacks, and said, “I muted Piet on Twitter because the deluge of responses was too abusive to cope with, but it had real-life consequences.” A few days later, while Haffajee attended the the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture where Jacob Zuma was to testify, she and other journalists were heckled and intimidated by the crowd (presumably Zuma supporters) chanting “cabal, cabal!”

5

DETAILED ANALYSIS OF OUR UNIQUE TWITTER DATASET



5.1 Categorizing the abuse in the primary dataset for Ferial Haffajee: dominant types, themes and tropes

Our primary Twitter data collection for Ferial Haffajee runs from 30 August 2021 to 1 March 2022, was collected in real-time. However, this dataset for Haffajee yielded a relatively low number of abusive tweets because she was not targeted by trolls during this time period to the same degree that she was, for example, during the Bell Pottinger campaign in 2016 and 2017. To account for this, we also collected some additional data: a retrospective-collection of tweets relating to Ferial Haffajee for the period of 1 January 2021 to 30 August 2021.

The retrospective collection process means that we did not have access to any tweets subsequently removed from Twitter, nor to tweets whose authors no longer have functioning accounts. As a result, we will have missed any abusive tweets during the earlier collection period which were removed or associated with deactivated accounts. Because of this factor, and the difference in collection methods between the two Twitter datasets, we will discuss the primary and secondary datasets separately.

Looking specifically at the set of clearly abusive tweets we have identified, we find 196 in total, of which 165 are replies to Haffajee, 19 are replies to other tweets, and 12 are retweets of other abusive tweets.

As already noted, the dataset shows a low number of abusive tweets aimed at Haffajee compared with what might be expected, given the fact that online violence occurs frequently in South Africa, and that Haffajee has been subjected to serious and large scale attacks on Twitter in the past. This discrepancy is primarily due to the timeframe of our data collection – the period during which Haffajee was the target of major abusive Twitter campaigns was before our data collection began, even considering the additional data back-collected from January 2021. Since the time Haffajee was a prime target, the trolls have moved on to other targets, including (but not limited to) other female journalists. Secondly, although Twitter was and still is the primary social media site for online violence against women journalists in South Africa, the abuse is not restricted to that platform, and may be found on other platforms and apps, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram. The trolls tend to select different targets and different platforms at different times, depending on what their political purpose is at that time (which may vary from week to week). Thirdly, as with the other case studies, the abuse is not always overt, and is not captured by automated tools since it may not be indicated by hashtags, offensive words or phrases, or may be “hidden” in memes, deepfakes, images, videos or expressed in subtle language.

Finally, Haffajee was less of a target on Twitter during the monitoring period than she had been previously because she deliberately altered the topics she elected to report on in response to large scale trolling. This contrasts with Pauli van Wyk’s approach, since Haffajee now tries to avoid reporting on topics which would make her a target for online violence.

Overall, the breakdown by category of all abusive terms shows the majority as personal attacks (60%) with a

TYPES OF ABUSE

APPROXIMATELY 60%

of all abuse detected by our tools against Ferial Haffajee on Twitter during the collection periods constitutes personal attacks according to analysis of our dataset

APPROXIMATELY 40%

of the abuse is designed to discredit her professionally

significant proportion (40%) of attacks on her professional credibility. She is also frequently described as a “politician in a journalist’s skin,” perceived as an elitist and a classist who should be in “Hell.” Of the personal attacks, 18.42% use misogynistic or sexually explicit terminology and 3.14% are classified as racist. 10.99% of all attacks are misogynistic or sexually explicit. The proportion of abusive tweets which are retweeted is low, but the proportional distribution of types remains constant when these are included. We also find politically-based abusive tweets connecting her to the African National Congress (ANC) and its corruption (many of which are not explicitly identified as abusive by our tools).

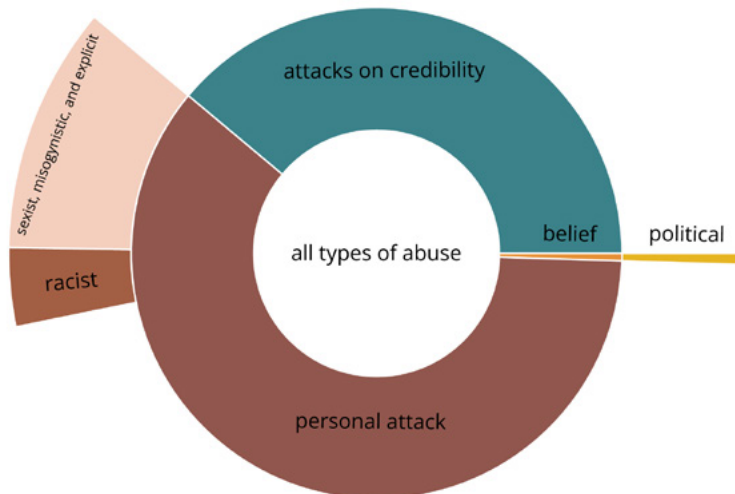


FIGURE 6: A visual breakdown of the types of abuse detected by the research team’s NLP tools, along with their respective proportions within the dataset of tweets targeting Haffajee.

5.2 Personal attacks designed to shame, humiliate and silence Ferial Haffajee

Ferial Haffajee’s credibility as a journalist was further attacked by trolls who digitally superimposed her face onto images that portrayed her in a demeaning and sexualized manner, highlighting the gendered nature of the abuse.

[Digitally manipulated imagery](#) depicted Haffajee in sexually suggestive positions together with businessman Johann Rupert, as a prostitute, as a member of a chorus line, or as a seductress. [These images](#) aimed to produce false impressions of her moral character, and the tweets regularly included the hashtag #Presstitute.

Given South Africa’s general social conservatism, as well as its culture of misogyny evidenced by its high incidence of physical gender-based violence, these fake sexualized representations of Haffajee are especially dangerous. The following tweets demonstrate the manifestation of gendered abuse in Haffajee’s case since 2016.

5.3 Attacks designed to discredit Haffajee's journalism and erode public trust in facts

Much of the online abuse directed at Haffajee is aimed at bringing her professional credibility as a journalist into question, and eroding public trust in the facts as they are reported by both Haffajee and her colleagues. Hashtags such as #WMC, #FakeNews and #Presstitute are frequently deployed for this purpose.

This trend was most noticeable during the Gupta-commissioned Bell Pottinger campaign in 2016 and early 2017, but tweets containing this type of abuse have continued to proliferate since then.

Throughout 2016 several journalists, including Haffajee, reported extensively on the corrupt relationship between the Guptas and the State. This became even more evident with the publication of then-Public Protector Thuli Madonsela's *'State of Capture'* report in November 2016. The proponents of State Capture countered this by initiating a disinformation campaign designed to paint the Public Protector's report as inaccurate, and the journalists who had exposed State capture in their reporting as liars.

The disinformation campaign tried to divert attention away from State capture by creating a 'new enemy,' that is, White Monopoly Capital (#WMC), thus positioning Haffajee and other journalists as the 'minions' of the then-finance minister and a majority white-run corporate sector. Haffajee was depicted as a pawn of wealthy white businessmen, especially Johan Rupert, whom she has never met.

Haffajee's abusers depicted her and several other journalists as unethical and not-to-be-trusted, falsely claiming that their journalistic independence was compromised because they were being paid by wealthy white businesspeople to publish 'lies.' In doing so, the trolls tried to erode public trust in the reporting of the journalists who exposed State capture and, by default, public belief that State capture was even real.



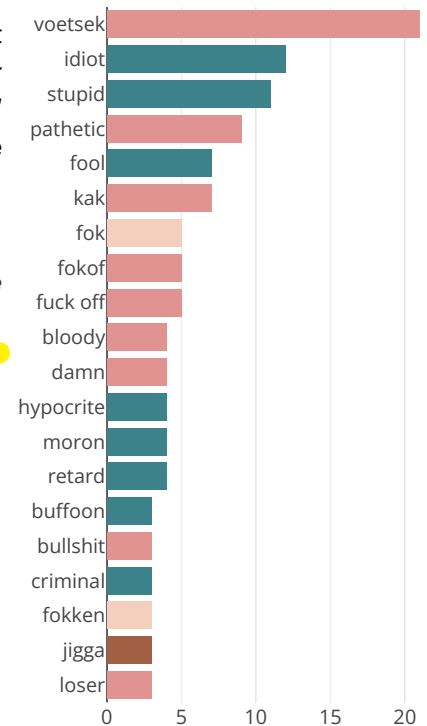
FIGURE 7 (left): Posted on Twitter in December 2016, this image calls Haffajee and other journalists "mamparas" — a South African term which refers to someone lacking intelligence or common sense. FIGURE 8 (right): Posted in May 2017, this tweet falsely suggests that Haffajee is the leader of a cohort of journalists who are paid to serve the interests of white businesspersons.



FIGURE 12: A word cloud showing the most frequent abusive terms found in the dataset of tweets aimed at Haffajee, including retweets (translated into English).

Compared with other case studies, it is interesting to note that a significant number of the abusive tweets contain nothing but a single abusive word or phrase, such as “@ferialhaffajee retarded” and “@ferialhaffajee Go to hell.” This suggests a knee jerk abusive reaction to any of Haffajee’s tweets on the part of the abusers.

FIGURE 13: A ranking of the top 25 most-frequently used abusive words from the dataset (including retweets), colored by abuse type.



5.5 Incidence, spikes and abuse triggers in the case of Ferial Haffajee

Online violence against Haffajee has been sustained to varying degrees over the past decade. As discussed, the first of four key spikes in the volume of online violence against her came after the City Press’ publication of an art review of Brett Murray’s ‘The Spear’. Then, online violence against Haffajee spiked again during the Gupta-commissioned Bell Pottinger campaign in November 2016, when she became the first South African woman journalist to be targeted by an intentionally orchestrated army of trolls.

Julius Malema’s labeling of Haffajee as a journalist which his EFF supporters ought to “deal with” sparked another round of online violence against her in November 2018, and Piet Rampedi’s accusation that Haffajee was part of a media “cabal” saw a further spike in the online violence aimed at her in July 2019.

While these four events appear to have triggered spikes in the online violence directed at Haffajee, she nonetheless receives online abuse via Twitter on a consistent basis, albeit at a reduced volume during the specific period we have studied here.

In our primary dataset collected specifically for this study – covering the period from 30 August 2021 and 1 March 2022 (Figure 19) – the biggest spikes of abuse occur on 8 February 2022, 17 October 2021, 17 September 2021, and 23 February 2022. But, again, these numbers are relatively low when compared to the abuse experienced by Haffajee in periods prior to our dataset date-range.

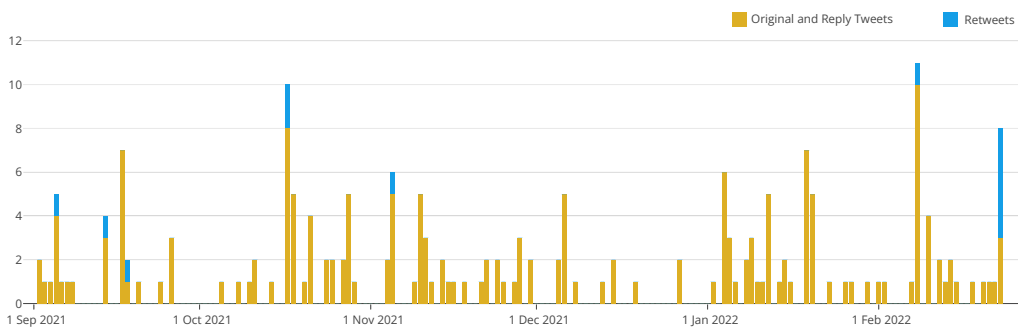


FIGURE 14: A timeline showing the incidence of abusive tweets targeting Haffajee between 30 August 2021 and 1 March 2022.

The tweet by Haffajee that generated the most abuse involved a denouncement of the lack of repercussions for the EFF in the wake of the violence committed by party members and supporters.

FIGURE 15: A tweet from Haffajee in January 2022 included an infographic that outlined the history of the EFF's violence, and sparked a torrent of online abuse from EFF supporters. The tweet replies show how abuse radiates to Haffajee's colleague Pauli van Wyk. For example, one user mocked Haffajee as "the new Pauli van Wyk," while another tweeted, "this shit don't work anymore ask your sister Pauli van Fake."



This generated responses such as: "Your moronic statement is flabbergasting and we are unshaken and unapologetic so your heart is in pain," and "Thanks media for feeding the beast, you loathsome scumbags."

Interestingly, we see evidence of abuse related to the hashtag #WMC (White Monopoly Capital) in both the main data collection and the back-fill collection, mostly accusing Haffajee and the *Daily Maverick* of lying and being unpatriotic Western agents. The hashtag #WMC and the term 'White Monopoly Capital' were popularized in the public discourse by Bell Pottinger in its 2016 Gupta-commissioned disinformation campaign. Despite the exposure of that campaign, these terms nonetheless continue to be used on Twitter to target journalists like Haffajee years later:

■ 2:59 PM · Jan. 6, 2022

Farial (sic) is the stooge of Ramaphosa who enjoys when black majority remain in poverty, if black people can be truly free she will leave the country. @CyrilRamaphosa is their bet to keep whites in charge

■ **2:46 AM · Feb. 3, 2021**

A must read for WMC media defence force posing as a journalist @ferialhaffajee . Amongst journalists is there a possibility some are agents of the west serving their countries interests. So why would a journalist call for her own country to dispel with Security? <https://t.co/K56wpeKhYI> OP-ED: State Security Agency Debate: Intelligence is the lifeblood of all nations <https://t.co/tZVeNBH4Nn>

And former ANC spokesperson and vocal supporter of former President Jacob Zuma, Carl Niehaus, tweeted the following:

■ **2:52 PM · Jan. 6, 2022**

@ferialhaffajee you are a shame faced liar. It is a blatant lie that I "organized WhatsApp groups for the [July] protests." You know very well that you are lying. Typical of the #WhiteMonopolyCapital (#WMC) agent that @dailymaverick is. <https://t.co/ovpeualpN>

We also see in the abusive tweets (from the retrospective collection) support for Piet Rampedi, the former colleague of Haffajee who launched a Twitter attack on her and other journalists in July 2019. The tweets in support of Rampedi refer to Haffajee and others as bad journalists:

■ **6:46 PM · June 9, 2021**

I hope all those stupid journalists are seeing the good kind of journalism we expect. Unlike these idiots @tshidi_lee @bonglez @ferialhaffajee @RediTlhabi. <https://t.co/Jl1KQddwTx> [Quote tweeted:] @BBCAfrica @LEN4Masilela His name is Piet Mahasha Rampedi @pietrampedi our very own, the best in the industry of journalism

■ **7:56 PM · June 23, 2021**

Piet Rampedi (@pietrampedi) is the ONLY Native Journalist in the country and we will always have GREAT respect for him. @SundayTimesZA @ferialhaffajee @RediTlhabi (NIYEZWA [do you understand]... all you fake journalists?)

It should be mentioned that in the main dataset for Haffajee, we do actually see opposition to Rampedi, which could be due to the time-period of the dataset: it was during this time that Rampedi published a story which claimed that a Tembisa woman had given birth to decuplets. This story was quickly discovered to be a hoax and caused a wave of criticism for Rampedi and Independent Media. In turn, that captured media house targeted *Daily Maverick*, its editor Branko Brkic and *Daily Maverick* journalists.

During this time period, the vast bulk (88%) of abusive tweets came in response to Haffajee's tweets, while 12% of the abuse was contained within replies to other users.

Our analysis reveals that some topics attracted more abusive responses than others. For example, the biggest spikes in abuse followed tweets from Haffajee about the judicial system, taxation, medical, political, and environmental issues.

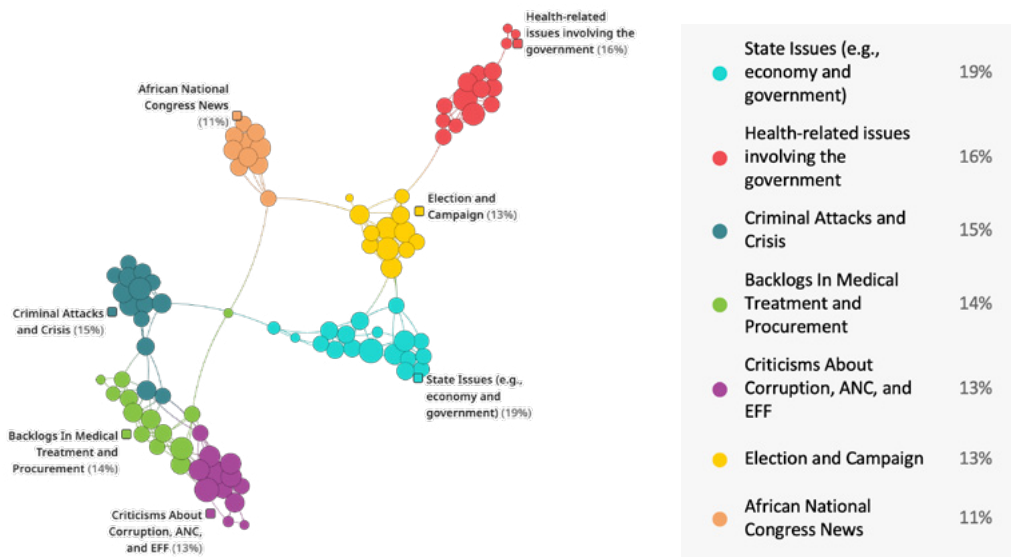


FIGURE 16: A graphic showing clusters of subject matter which most-often inspired abusive responses on Twitter. Graphic: The Nerve

Criticism about corruption involving the ANC and EFF resulted in the highest percentage of abuse targeted at Ferial Haffajee (24%). These are mostly general and reputational attacks, and contain more sexual remarks compared to others.

Pandemic-related conversations triggered almost the same amount of abuse towards Haffajee, with reports on backlogs in medical treatment and procurement leading to a comparable amount of general and reputation attacks. Health-related issues involving the government, on the other hand, garnered more general abuse. A similar cluster of triggers where the government is the center of conversations – the “State Issues” cluster – also garnered a more general type of abuse. Other themes of triggers (for example, election-related) resulted mostly in attacks on Haffajee’s reputation and general abusive remarks.

We can break down the abusive tweets clustered according to the type of thematic trigger (see graphic above) into the following categories:

- **State Issues (e.g., economy and government) (19%).** Haffajee received attacks relating to her tweets about the issues of the Judicial Service Commission and their unlawful interviews; Ace Magashule’s issues with Mamparas;¹⁶ budget and grants reviews; tax increase issues; and lawlessness in South Africa.
- **Health-related issues involving the government (16%).** Ferial Haffajee received abusive tweets when she tweeted about the government revoking the medical parole of Jacob Zuma, and requiring workers to be vaccinated.
- **Criminal Attacks and Crises (15%).** These include reports about heavily-armed criminals attacking infrastructures.

¹⁶ Elias ‘Ace’ Magashule is a South African politician and former Secretary General of the African National Congress. He was suspended from this role in May 2021 after the Directorate for Priority Crime Investigation charged him with 21 counts of corruption, theft, fraud and money laundering. ‘Mampara’ is a South African term referring to a person who is lacking intelligence or sense, or a fool.

- **Backlogs In Medical Treatment and Procurement. (14%).** These include tweets related to medical issues such as backlogs in the cancer treatment, process and delivery of vaccinations, and innovations implementation associated with the pandemic.
- **Criticisms About Corruption, ANC, and EFF (13%).** These are triggered by tweets about bringing back the Guptas; ANC's progress in the election period; windfall tax concerns; and violence committed by the EFF, resulting in the questioning of Ferial Haffajee's journalistic credibility.
- **Election and Campaign (13%).** These are about the 2019 election and campaign process, including the site visit of Julius Malema with the EFF in the Free State province, the similarities of two parties – Democratic Alliance (DA) and ANC – and the status of Freedom Front Plus, a right-wing political party in South Africa founded in 1994.
- **African National Congress News (11%).** These are tweets tackling issues related to the ANC, e.g. their support system, their candidates, and Ramaphosa pleading to the public to vote ANC in the 2019 national and provincial elections.

5.6 Analysis of the retrospective dataset for Ferial Haffajee

Excluding tweets and retweets by Haffajee, this dataset contains 69,620 tweets, of which 262 are identified as clearly abusive by the automated software. Of these, 222 are replies to Haffajee, 23 are replies to other tweets, and 17 are retweets of other abusive tweets. Out of all tweets by Ferial in this collection, 2,041 received at least one reply, and 126 (6.16%) received at least one abusive reply. This is very slightly higher than the figures for the main dataset for Ferial, where 5.10% of all tweets she posted received at least one abusive reply.

The tweet by Haffajee that received the most abuse was the following post published on 11 July 2021, which received a number of generic abusive replies telling her to “fuck off” and calling her “stupid,” but also a number of overtly sexist and sexual responses, such as “peace will be kept in your ass, girl.” Responses accusing her of racism also featured: “Now you want the army to kill black people you bloody Indian racist,” as well as degrading personal abuse such as “witch” and “you ugly woman.”

FIGURE 17: A 2021 tweet, posted by Haffajee, which received the most abusive responses of any single post in the dataset.

The tweet with the second highest number of abusive responses was a post from Haffajee citing an article about the death of amaZulu King Goodwill [suggesting](#) that this offered the opportunity to “modernize, democratize and depoliticize the governance system underpinning the monarchy, traditional structures and norms.”



Abusive terms in the retrospective dataset for Ferial Haffajee

The most popular hashtags in this dataset are slightly different from the previous dataset but nevertheless the main themes of COVID-19 and State capture are still very prominent.

In terms of abuse types and frequent abusive terms, we see a very similar pattern to the primary dataset, indicating that the ways in which abuse is demonstrated did not change dramatically between the two periods. However, we do notice in this dataset a small amount of specifically political terminology such as the use of “libtard” (an offensive portmanteau used to deride progressive thinkers combining the words ‘liberal’ and ‘retarded’) to describe her. Additionally, we see more racist abuse such as “bloody Indian,” “stupid black,” and “white trash,” and more sexist appearance-based abuse in this second dataset, including fat-shaming and words like “ugly.” We also see the use of “witch” – a misogynistic abuse term which we routinely see in the worst cases of online violence against women journalists internationally.



FIGURE 18: A word cloud showing the most frequently-used abusive terms in the retrospective dataset.



FIGURE 19: A word cloud showing the most frequently used abusive terms (including Afrikaans terms translated into English).¹⁷

17 English translations: skelm = criminal; fokof = fuck off; domkop = idiot; jou poes = your cunt; kak = shit; fokken = fucking; fok = fuck; dof = stupid; doos = arsehole.

"It's been five years since I first found very early deepfakes of myself," Haffajee [said in 2020](#). "And since then, it's a fairly standard week for me to be called a 'bitch,' or 'racist,' or 'ugly,' or 'stupid,' or a 'terrible journalist.' So much so, that it's entirely internalized and normalized for me until I remember that it's absolutely abnormal."

6.0 Comparative big data case study: Pauli van Wyk

As discussed above, the patterns of abuse leveled at Ferial Haffajee inspired us to conduct a smaller analysis of abusive tweets aimed at one of her high-profile female colleagues at the *Daily Maverick*, investigative reporter Pauli van Wyk. She has also been subjected to horrific online abuse, including threats that she would be "shot in the pussy," and death threats which we also see in our dataset. One particularly menacing tweet contained an image of a hand grenade, the implication being of a death threat.

This dataset, collected via the technique of backfilling as real-time collection was not possible, contains 90,083 tweets posted between 1 January 2021 and 1 March 2022. After excluding original tweets by van Wyk and retweets of her tweets by others, there are 56,736 tweets authored by other Twitter users. 5,291 are original tweets directed at van Wyk, 34,059 are replies from these users, and 17,386 are retweets of others' original posts.

Looking specifically at the set of tweets identified as abusive by our analysis, we find 309 in total, of which 228 are replies to van Wyk, 21 are replies to tweets from other users, and 59 are retweets of other abusive tweets. Only one tweet was an original tweet directed at van Wyk. Although we did not have a complete dataset for van Wyk, we see that her tweets are more than twice as likely to trigger an abusive comment than Haffajee's.

6.1 Categorizing the abuse in the Pauli van Wyk dataset: dominant types, themes and tropes

The abuse terms that proliferate in this dataset are also very similar to those used against Haffajee. The most frequently seen terms tend to be personal attacks, and attacks on her professional credibility such as "idiot," "stupid," "fool," "kak (shit)." Attacks designed to discredit van Wyk and her journalism include accusations or any statement with implications that may damage her reputation, and public trust in her journalism, such as "useless journalist," "fake news peddler," "criminal" and "liar." Her attackers also claim that she is a racist.

In terms of abuse types, overall we see most of the abuse (53.92%) is personal, with 20.67% of that abuse being sexist, misogynistic or sexually explicit. Attacks on professional credibility account for 45.78% of the abuse, with 1.32% of that being specifically gendered. Race-based abuse constitutes 5.72% of all abuse, and 10.61% of the personal attacks, which is a much higher percentage than we see for the other South African journalists.

TYPES OF ABUSE

APPROXIMATELY 54%

of all abuse against Pauli van Wyk on Twitter constituted personal attacks, and about 21% of abuse in this category was gender-based, while 11% can be understood as race-based

APPROXIMATELY 46%

of the abuse appears to be explicitly designed to discredit van Wyk professionally

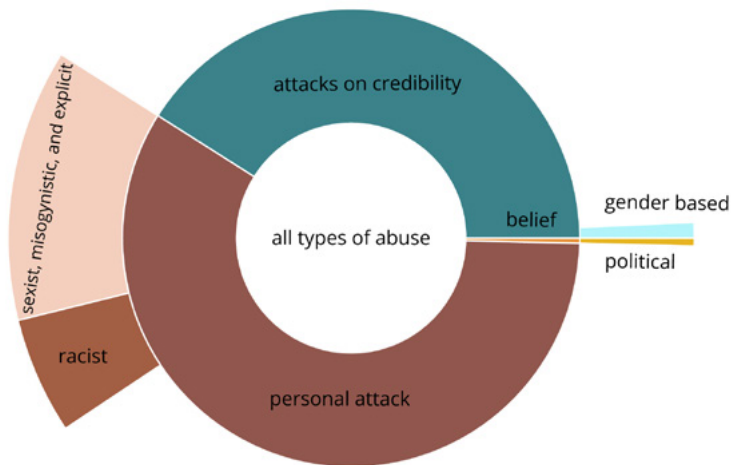


FIGURE 20: A visual breakdown of the types of abuse used to target van Wyk on Twitter, as detected by our NLP tools.

Within the portion of tweets identified as sexist, sexualized and misogynistic, terms such as “bitch,” “moerskont” (“massive cunt”), “hore” (sic.) and “witch” proliferate. There are also attempts to belittle her professional capability based on her gender e.g., calling her a “stupid woman.” And there is evidence of race-based abuse, involving references to van Wyk’s skin color in an effort to discredit her e.g., calling her a “stupid white woman.”

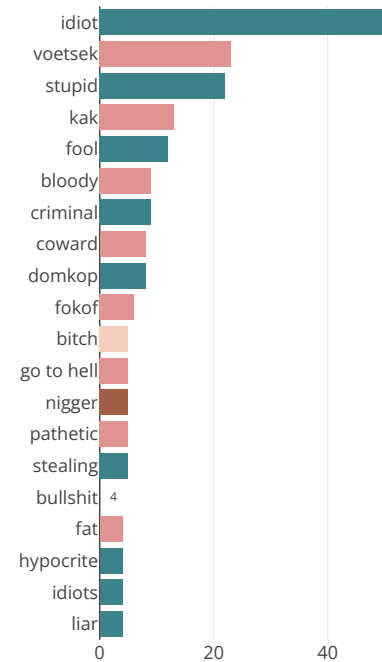


FIGURE 21: A word cloud of most frequently-used abusive terms targeted at van Wyk.



FIGURE 22: Word cloud of most frequently-used abusive terms targeted at van Wyk, with Afrikaans terms translated into English.

FIGURE 23: A ranking of the 25 most frequently-used abusive terms directed at Pauli van Wyk (including retweets), colored by abuse type.



We also see a number of Afrikaans terms that are not present in our abuse dictionaries, such as “gat gogga” (“arse kisser”), as well as terms from Xhosa such as “wena moloi” (“you witch”).

Some additional examples of abusive tweets from February 2021 in response to van Wyk’s tweet about corruption from our dataset:

■ 10:05 pm · 10 Feb 2021

“She always showed herself to be a zuma gat gogga” (which translates to “Zuma arse-kisser”).

■ 8:47 am · 16 Feb 2021

Fokof wena smunu mhlophe (which translates to “Fuck off you white”).

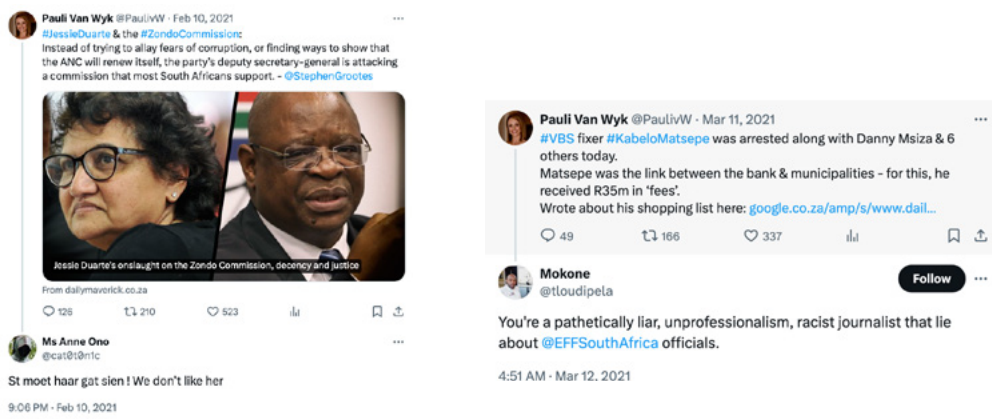


FIGURE 24 (left): A tweet posted in February 2021 reads, “St moet haar gat sien!” which translates to “she must fall on her ass.” FIGURE 25 (right): In response to her reporting on the VBS Bank corruption scandal, Pauli van Wyk is accused of (being) “a pathetically liar, unprofessionalism, racist journalist that lie about @EFFSouthAfrica officials.”



FIGURE 26: An EFF supporter’s tweet which questions Van Wyk’s professional credibility as a journalist after her reporting on the VBS banking scandal.



FIGURE 27: An EFF supporter’s tweet which questions Van Wyk’s credibility as a journalist in the wake of her reporting on the VBS scandal, calling her a “professional liar.”



FIGURE 28 (left): A now-deleted tweet posted on 25 June 2020, which accuses van Wyk of “running away from her lies.” The account associated with this tweet has since been deleted. FIGURE 29 (right): A 2020 tweet containing a particularly menacing threat against Pauli van Wyk – a picture of a hand grenade.

6.2 Abuse triggers in the case of Pauli van Wyk

Looking at the mechanisms for the abuse towards Pauli van Wyk in our dataset, it appears that the attacks rely on particular triggers, since most of the abuse involves replies to tweets from and about her rather than abusers sending spontaneous threats.

In the dataset overall, we see two spikes of abuse: 16 to 18 August 2021, especially on 17 August, and a spike of retweets of that abuse on 18 August.¹⁸

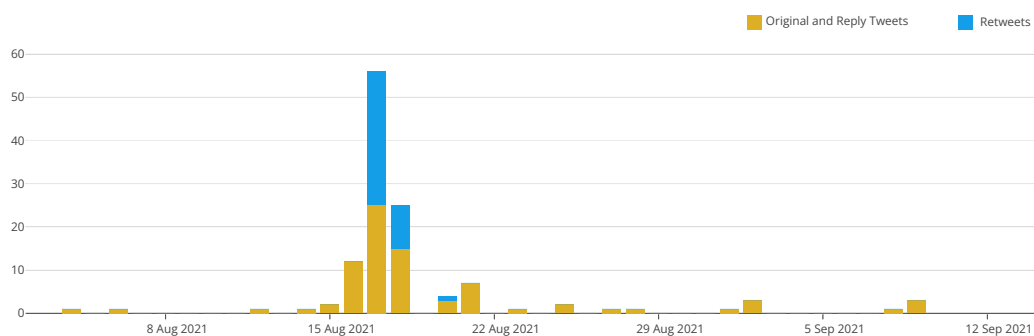


FIGURE 30: A timeline showing the incidence of abusive tweets targeting van Wyk from mid-August to mid-September in 2021; note how much more clearly it spikes in August compared with September.

These abusive replies and retweets do not correspond to a single tweet by van Wyk, but rather to a whole series of tweets by her on 16 August. This is a different abuse pattern from that which we see frequently with other journalists whose abuse we have studied. For example, in the case of Indian journalist Rana Ayyub, very large spikes of abuse (including many retweets of abusive tweets) are frequently related to a single tweet from her. In the case of Pauli van Wyk, however, we see the abuse distributed around a number of different tweets from her.

¹⁸ The numbers here are small compared to some of our other case studies, but nevertheless they are significant in proportion to the timeline of abuse in this dataset.

FIGURE 31: Two examples of harmful tweet replies that are not captured by our Natural Language Processing tools due to their lack of overtly abusive terms; the top tells van Wyk she “seriously needs help” and is “obsessed with finding them guilty”; the lower one fans the climate for the persecution of journalists by “looking forward” to the arrests of van Wyk and, presumably, other journalists (“Guys”) at *Daily Maverick*.



Thematic catalysts for abuse towards van Wyk can be classified into two categories: corruption, and politics and government.

The majority (56%) of the abusive tweets fall under the “Corruption” category, and many were posted in response to van Wyk’s own tweets concerning the VBS Mutual Bank scandal. These tweets mostly contained attacks on her reputation as a person and as a professional. Small portions of sexual, sexist, racist, and political attacks can also be observed in the data.

Most of these triggers are associated with tweets from Pauli van Wyk, although a small portion of them also came from other profiles in which she was mentioned.

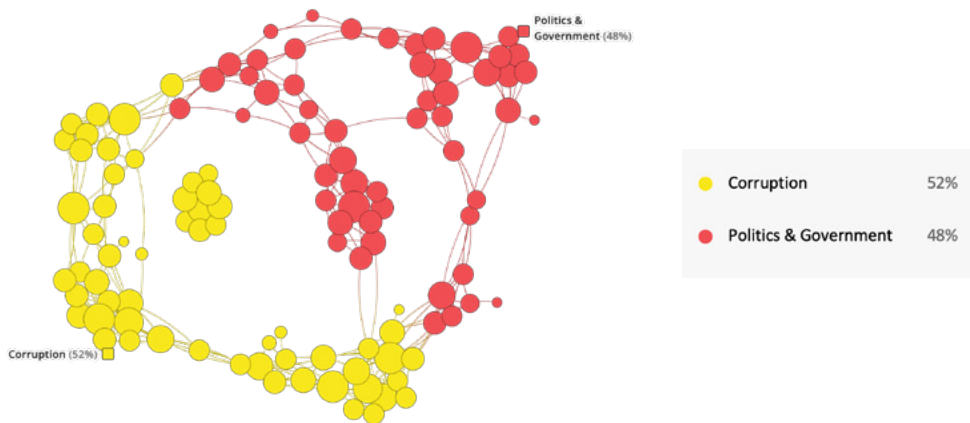


FIGURE 32: Clusters of subject matter which most often inspired abusive responses targeting van Wyk on Twitter. Graphic: The Nerve.

Politics and government-related clusters include tweets about the EFF, the justice system, and tweets about fascism. These categories can be further broken down into more focused clusters.

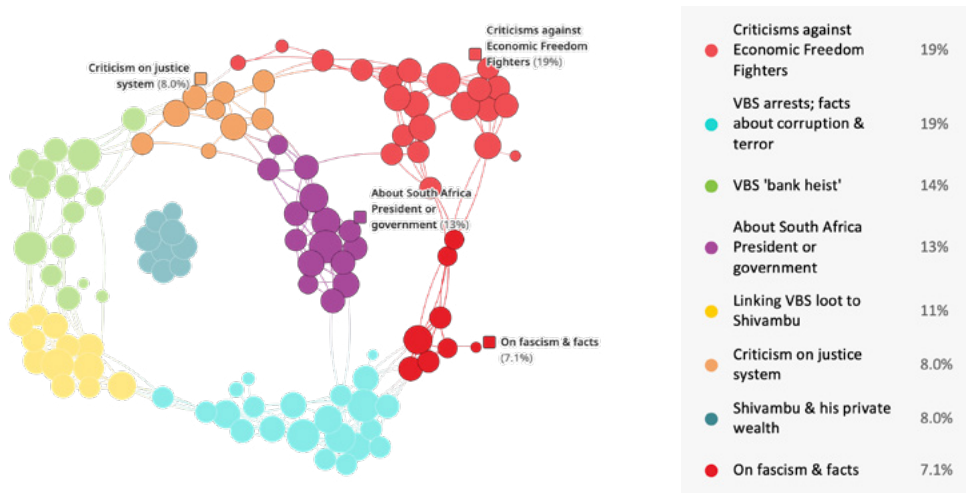


FIGURE 33: Clusters of subject matter which most often inspired abusive responses targeting van Wyk on Twitter. Graphic: The Nerve.

- **Criticisms against Economic Freedom Fighters (19%).** These are statements that point out EFF faux pas, which include its stance on the [use of the Sputnik vaccine in South Africa](#), and the credibility of the party's leaders.
- **About the South African President or government (13%).** These are statements that either criticize or address the performance or behavior of the government or the South African President at the time, Cyril Ramaphosa.
- **Criticism of the justice system (8%).** These are tweets related to what van Wyk called Ramaphosa's "[power-grabby](#)" moves in government, and the inconsistencies, lack of ethics, and criminality of the Economic Freedom Fighters party.
- **On fascism & facts (7%).** These are tweets stating authoritarian tendencies of Economic Freedom Fighters.

The corruption-related clusters identified were mostly about Floyd Shivambu and the VBS 'bank heist' issue. Floyd Shivambu is a South African politician and the incumbent Deputy President of the Economic Freedom Fighters. In 2018, Pauli Van Wyk [reported](#) that he benefited from the VBS Mutual Bank scandal, in which his brother, Brian Shivambu, was involved. The corruption-related triggers can be further broken down like this:

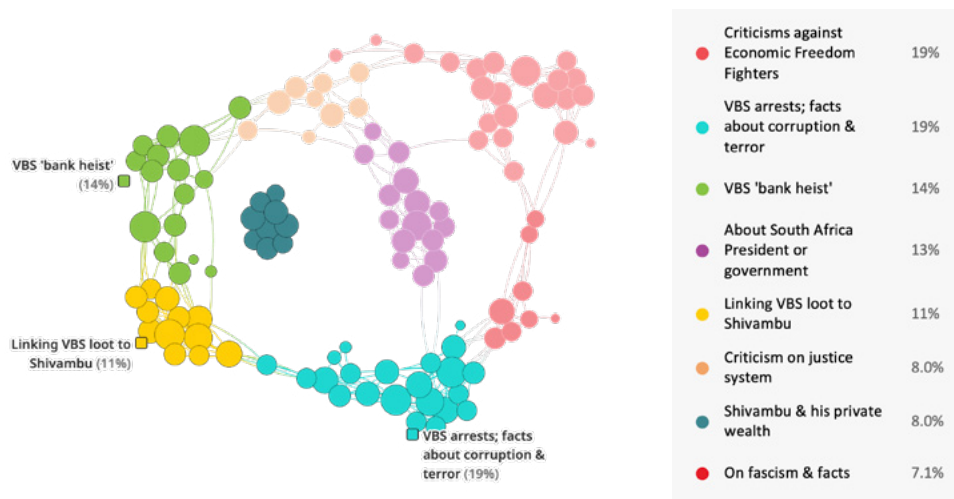


FIGURE 34: Clusters of subject matter which most-often inspired abusive responses targeting van Wyk on Twitter. Graphic: The Nerve.

- **VBS arrests; facts about corruption & terror (19%).** These triggers largely revolve around corruption, notably on the VBS Mutual Funds and arrests related to it.
- **VBS 'bank heist' (14%).** These triggers are about the VBS bank scandal.
- **Linking VBS loot to Shivambu (11%).** These are expositions about the link between Brian and Floyd Shivambu and the VBS Mutual Fund heist.

- **Shivambu & his private wealth (8%).** These are [commentaries](#) regarding Floyd Shivambu and his private wealth as the VBS Mutual Fund heist is being exposed.

Tweets related to politics and the government triggered more general abuse, as opposed to specific attacks on her professional reputation. It is noteworthy how government-related thematic triggers result in substantially more racialized abuse towards van Wyk compared with corruption-related tweets. The race-based attacks mostly pertain to her being white, and seek to discredit her as a racist, and as someone not fit to report on matters about a Black majority population.

6.3 Hashtags associated with attacks on Pauli van Wyk

In our set of abusive tweets, we see very few hashtags, and almost none that occur more than once, with the exception of #vbs. This hashtag refers to a [206-page indictment](#) detailing the 2018 implosion of VBS Mutual Bank, following one of South Africa's most notorious corruption scandals. When van Wyk posted about this in connection with her investigative reporting on the EFF's role in the collapse via its money laundering activities, she was subjected to abuse calling her a witch and accusing her of racism by talking negatively about EFF and not discussing white criminals, as the example tweet addressed to her below (Figure 36) shows.

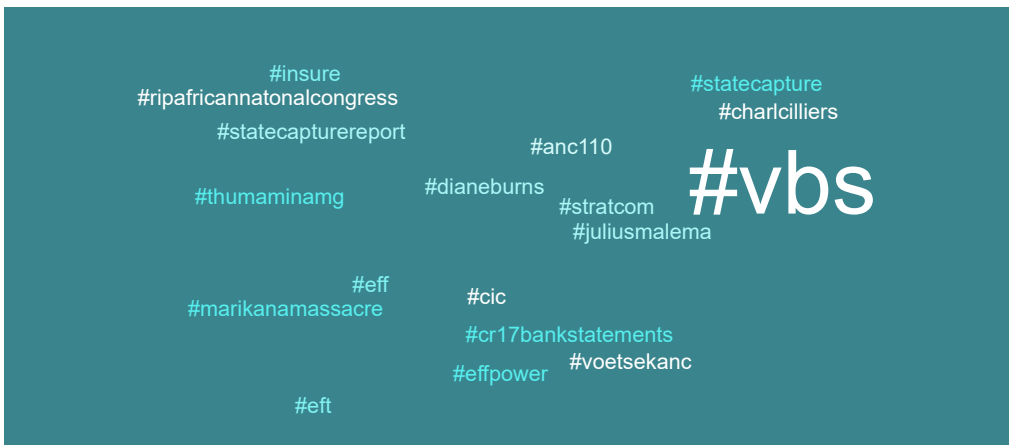


FIGURE 35: A word cloud showing the most frequently-used hashtags in the abusive dataset for Pauli van Wyk, indicating the main topics of discussion.

FIGURE 36: A 2021 tweet in response to Pauli van Wyk's news tweet about arrests in connection with the VBS Mutual Bank corruption case, accusing her of racism and wishing COVID-19 on her: "stupid white lady...all I wish u is Corona nothing else...."



7. Who are the abusive tweeters?

“Essentially, we have created the weapons – social media – the ability for everybody to express themselves. But it turned out to be a very easy thing to weaponize. Attacks against women journalists are a subset of it, although they are probably the biggest subset and the most vicious.”

- Branko Brkic, 2020

In South Africa, trolls are motivated by a variety of factors, and do not necessarily share a unified political or ideological affiliation. According to *Daily Maverick* Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic, it is impossible to identify one central node from whence stems the majority of abuse; instead, it is motivated by a complex web of factors which he likens to a ‘matrix’.

When asked by researchers if she could identify a broad category of abusers which had targeted her online, Rebecca Davis said:

It’s very easy for me to answer that because overwhelmingly my most passionate critics have been older white men in South Africa. There’s just something about me that seems to really get under their skin.

In Davis’ case, the country’s culture of misogyny and homophobia appears to have motivated the majority of the online abuse directed at her. For other women journalists, like Ferial Haffajee, Pauli van Wyk, or Ranjeni Munusamy, their exposés on State capture, corruption or maladministration by the ANC and its members, or critique and exposés related to Julius Malema and the EFF, have resulted in them being targeted in online violence campaigns.

The Gupta-commissioned Bell Pottinger campaign was the first instance in which a purposefully orchestrated mass disinformation campaign was unleashed in South Africa on social media. However, since then, coordinated disinformation campaigns, which include online violence against women journalists, have continued.

A 2018 study on South African Twitter bot behavior for the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) found that seven journalists, five of whom were women, were systematically followed by **malicious bot accounts**. Ferial Haffajee was one of them. The study tracked fledgling bot accounts (known as ‘eggs’) and assessed their behavior during the time in which these accounts began establishing a presence and following on Twitter.

It concluded that accounts with **features of automation** in South Africa showed many of the same characteristic behaviors, but notably, they all systematically followed the same Twitter accounts of a short list of South African television news services, newspapers and journalists, including the *Daily Maverick’s* Twitter account (@dailymaverick).

The CSIR study indicates that even though the Bell Pottinger disinformation campaign and its fake Twitter army was exposed, malicious bot accounts and Twitter armies continued to operate in South Africa with women journalists, including Haffajee, as ongoing targets.

8. The experience and impact of the abuse

According to Ferial Haffajee, the personal impact of online violence is chilling, especially because the hateful messages are delivered via mobile devices which are now integral to daily life. "It has a very chilling impact on you because your phone is an appendage, it's part of your body now. And so those attacks, they're personal, they go right into you."



FIGURE 37: A cheapfake image depicts Haffajee as a cow being milked by Johann Rupert, on Twitter in December 2016, and another deeply sexist cheapfake of Haffajee distributed via Twitter in December 2016 that depicts her as a dog being walked by Johann Rupert.

During the Bell Pottinger campaign, the attacks against Haffajee were especially disturbing because many of the messages included manipulated images depicting her in humiliating and sexually explicit ways as detailed above. In a [UNESCO-led panel discussion in 2020](#) connected to related research, Haffajee said:

I'm quite a serious minded and sometimes quite a shy person. So to wake up after doing one of those stories and find myself on Twitter, which until then was a platform I quite enjoyed, and to see myself, my face put on a picture of cow and of dog and of being in a chorus line and of being either on the knee of, or in the bed of, a very famous billionaire who was in the line of attack of the trolling army as well, was extremely shocking because I didn't understand doxxing. I didn't understand trolling armies. It just seemed to come from the blue.

These attacks also made her concerned about the response of her family. "I was surprised by my own response, by how it was shaming me, how I felt I needed to explain those images to my family who don't really know the world of social media, or doxxing, or deepfakes," she said.

All too aware that many other women journalists experience similar levels of online violence, Haffajee has expressed concern that several colleagues have abandoned Twitter because the abuse "became too unbearable." For her part, Haffajee has chosen to remain on Twitter in spite of the trolls, and is determined not to allow them to "be victorious in their actions." However, she acknowledges that "the past five years have really seen me change my beats, and they've seen me change my habits of what I report on and what I won't." The same can be said for several other women journalists who, for example, no

longer attend the rallies or press conferences of, or report on, specific political parties for fear of triggering online violence.

One woman journalist who did decide to stop tweeting is Rebecca Davis; while she still has a Twitter account, she no longer logs onto the platform and her last tweet was in 2018. Davis said: "The best thing I could have done for myself was to leave Twitter and Facebook." Davis recalled in her interview with researchers that the defining moment for her came when she was at a family gathering but was interrupted by a Twitter user's disparaging comment aimed at her:

I immediately left the table and started composing this furious response. And I realized I'd lost the plot, in terms of sacrificing personal family time for engagement with strangers on the internet. And that was just enough of a wakeup call.

However, Davis is quick to acknowledge that she was in a privileged position regarding her decision to abandon Twitter:

I was in a hugely privileged position for being able to leave Twitter, but many female journalists are not.

Davis compares her own position to that of a younger female journalist, for whom "it's unthinkable to leave Twitter because it is a vital way of growing her profile. I'm just at a point where I'm in stable employment, and I feel lucky enough to be able to leave the platform without much of a reputational hit. And to me, that's one of the most insane things about this; that I consider myself lucky and fortunate not to have to wade through piles of online abuse daily because I have an established career, which I'm very well aware would not be the case if I didn't."

Davis likens leaving Twitter to shutting off a tap of abuse. But even though she doesn't engage on the platform any longer, digital violence is nonetheless still directed at her via Twitter, which she is made aware of by Twitter-using friends and colleagues. And while Davis no longer interacts on Twitter, her trolls have found alternative platforms and mechanisms with which to target her. One of these is in the reader comments which appear on the *Daily Maverick* website below articles.

Reader comments on articles were really a bane of my professional career. Daily Maverick then took steps; now only our registered community members can comment, which has helped to a certain degree, but it just means that now the vitriol is from a much smaller pool of recognizable names.

But in 2022, the bar was lowered again, with non-members being allowed to comment by simply registering. An uptick in abuse followed.

While the news industry has yet to grapple with how to effectively support and protect female journalists who are subjected to online violence, [Haffjee worries](#) that the abuse may become an increasing "push factor" for women to leave journalism altogether in favor of other professions such as public relations.

8.1 The risk of online violence fomenting physical violence and abuse

For Ferial Haffajee the potential for online violence to manifest itself offline is a legitimate concern. During a [2021 panel discussion at the International Symposium on Online Journalism](#), she explained:

For me, that's a real fear. You can almost feel the online violence gives permission (for physical violence) when you're out in the field. Like it's open season. And I experienced this at a commission of inquiry into corruption with lots of us (journalists). Suddenly it makes your work in the field more dangerous and difficult.

According to *Daily Maverick's* editor, Branko Brkic, physical violence against journalists that has been encouraged by online violence would serve the purpose of some of South Africa's political parties. He says that the first purpose of online violence is to:

...get women journalists to be afraid. And then if some crazy person sees her in the street and attacks her that's better for them (political parties, particularly the EFF) because they can claim plausible deniability in that 'they did not order' that specific attack. Ranjeni Munusamy was accosted at a supermarket. But you couldn't actually draw the direct line between Malema and her because Malema didn't order the attack. But he was no doubt very happy that it happened.

While there are currently no known cases of women journalists being assaulted or killed in South Africa in connection with online violence, Brkic told researchers that he worries the digital abuse that has become so popular in the country may someday spill over into the physical world.

We've been lucky so far. But considering the state of our police and the security cluster, there's a great chance that the journalists are going to get hurt and nothing is going to happen. And once they taste the first blood...

Brkic is so concerned about the risk of online violence translating into offline violence that when journalist Pauli van Wyk published a story on the *Daily Maverick* that uncovered the involvement of the EFF and its leader Malema's involvement in money laundering and looting of the VBS bank, Brkic sent van Wyk to a remote part of South Africa for her own safety. He later [moved van Wyk](#) around the country in secret when the attacks escalated and van Wyk credits him with her survival as a journalist.

Speaking to the potential for online violence to move offline, [van Wyk said in 2022](#):

There's actually a causality between attacks on social media and what happens in the real world. It's very difficult to say to a judge or to a prosecutor that when you are being called 'Satan' or 'a witch is burning' (which refers to the practice

of necklacing) or 'wa phapha' [translation: you are too forward] or anything like that – the psychology behind is to dehumanize you. It's to make you seem less human so that it's okay to attack this person. And when [politicians] do that, that is when people start to say that you must be raped to teach you a lesson, or you must be necklaced. And in South Africa there's obviously a very violent context to being necklaced. I think the underlying theme must always be do no harm. You [politicians] cannot say something that you know will get someone to act on it in a criminal way.

In 2019 van Wyk published [another story](#) about the EFF and the VBS scandal just ahead of South Africa's local government elections. On this occasion, the EFF leadership did not respond to the story on Twitter due to the country's strict election laws. Van Wyk noted in [a 2019 interview with eNCA](#) that, in contrast to the Twitter abuse she received when publishing on the same matter in 2018, her Twitter trolls were remarkably silent.

It's very clear that when politicians make certain comments about journalists, their followers will obviously follow their lead. The perfect example would be the VBS matter where between October and December 2018 the whole of the EFF (leadership) called me Satan. And the backlash of that was that their supporters said that I should be raped and hanged and burned. This week I wrote another story and it was published in the Daily Maverick and the (EFF) leaders kept quiet because we have very stringent IEC laws and we're just before an election. And there were none of those death threats or rape threats from their followers. So it's very clear that politicians have a big influence on the violence meted out toward journalists.

Rebecca Davis highlights that even though online violence does not necessarily translate into physical violence, it nonetheless reflects the misogynistic social norms which she experiences in the physical realm.

The abuse one receives online is replicated to a smaller degree in real life. It's not the case that the internet is a unique social dynamic which doesn't reflect real world reality – it absolutely does. We live in a terrible, toxic, sexist, misogynist society. And every time that someone has abused me online, I have been mansplained to in the most condescending way in real life.

Additionally, Davis has noticed a significant increase in the number of times she has had a complaint laid against her with the Press Council of South Africa (PCSA) since leaving Twitter, pointing to the other avenues open to people who seek to frustrate the work of women journalists. On this, she says, "The Press Ombud is a vital tool. But for 10 years I was never taken to the Press Ombudsman. Last year alone this happened five times, and that was such a noticeable uptick for me that I couldn't help but wonder about it, especially because in some cases their complaints seemed so thin. And I think it is the case that it's being increasingly abused as another tool to silence. What I have observed is increasing use of that mechanism in a way that I am a bit suspicious of"

Preparing for a hearing at the Press Council can demand a great deal of a journalist's time, during which they need to prepare a defense and consult with legal services — which draws their energy and attention away from their usual writing assignments. While Davis values the PCSA system, she is concerned that it is being more frequently used by opponents of women journalists merely as a mechanism to distract journalists from their usual investigative and writing work.

Apart from the use of alternative platforms to frustrate or target women journalists outside of social media, the potential for online violence to translate into physical violence is high, especially within the context of South Africa's culture of misogyny and high incidence rate of gender-based violence (see section 2.1).

9. Reporting on and responding to online violence against women journalists

"First and foremost, caring for female journalists is actually caring for journalists. Period."

- Branko Brkic, 2020

The South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) is a non-profit organization with its membership comprising editors, senior journalists and journalism educators. In South Africa it is the most active body which monitors the harassment and intimidation of journalists. Where incidences of abuse aimed at journalists occur, SANEF responds through issuing press statements, and in serious cases, with litigation. As a result, the SANEF archive of press statements is [the most complete record](#) of abuses on journalists available within the country.

Now the Executive Director of the Association of Independent Publishers, Kate Skinner was the Executive Director of SANEF from 2018 to 2021, so she was at the helm when SANEF launched the aforementioned court case against the EFF seeking to block the party and its members from threatening journalists. But SANEF [lost the harassment case](#) against the EFF. In an interview with researchers, Skinner said that this was largely due to jurisdictional issues related to the Equality Court in which the case was heard, and not because SANEF's case lacked legitimacy:

We got bad legal advice... One of the big things for us was speed. We wanted a quick decision to be taken before the 2019 elections. And so, one of the strategic issues for us was which court to use. We were given legal advice to go to the Equality Court. And we felt that this would expedite the case... But then we lost because they said, you should not have brought this particular action to this particular court because using equality legislation is not appropriate... We didn't manage to do what we'd hoped, which was to stop political parties, but particularly the EFF from harassing journalists.

In hindsight, Skinner said it would have been better to approach the High Court and use harassment legislation as opposed to equality legislation in a case related to the

harassment and intimidation of journalists. South Africa currently does have legislation in statute which could potentially be used in a journalist harassment case in other courts, but this has yet to be tested in this manner.

Sadly, journalists suffering harassment in South Africa receive little assistance from the South African Police Service (SAPS) or the criminal justice system, since the police themselves are woefully ill-equipped and lack the digital literacy to investigate online violence, as [Haffajee has noted](#):

We are so behind the curve of even beginning to get our criminal justice systems to tackle online harassment. Many journalists have tried to lay charges. The police don't even have smartphones [or data], so they cannot do that kind of sophisticated digital forensic work. So, this is really...the next big fight we need to have.

Rebecca Davis told researchers that she worries about the possibility of online violence translating into physical violence but believes that the police would be reluctant to respond to online violence as a precursor for offline harm both due to more pressing priority crimes, and also, a lack of familiarity with the phenomenon of online violence:

If I had to go to the...police station and say, 'Someone's abusing me on Twitter.' I guarantee they (the police) would be like; 'What the fuck man? I have 10 women who've been raped around the corner. What do you expect me to do about it?' There's also just a lack of familiarity from law enforcement and frankly, more pressing priorities to deal with. It would need to be addressed with the help of the criminal justice sector.

For her part, Ferial Haffajee has made efforts to fight her abusers. As discussed, she did not join SANEF's court case against the EFF. But she has changed her behavior on Twitter, actively blocking her abusers, and she has written extensively about the issue, thus increasing public awareness about online violence against journalists. She said in a [2020 panel discussion](#):

This is an essential frontier to protect media freedom, and specifically to protect it for women for whom it has been a decades long struggle to enable us to report politics and investigations and to claim our spaces in newsrooms where often we've been consigned to other beats. So I'm not going to be pushed away. It's taken too many people's work to get us to do the work that we want to do.

FIGURE 38: A tweet by Ferial Haffajee, posted on 21 January 2017, in which she combats online violence by juxtaposing fake digitally manipulated images with a genuine photograph of herself which she says depicts her investigating "trolls."



During the Bell Pottinger campaign, she combated the online violence she experienced by using her own Twitter presence to point out where her abusers had issued disinformation-laced or fake content related to her. She also authored a [series of feature articles](#) describing the online violence she was subjected to.

While Haffajee admits that her first reaction to online violence was to feel deeply shamed which initially prompted her to “keep quiet about it,” her response changed over time. [She said in 2021:](#)

I just followed all the advice at the beginning of this trend of ‘don’t feed the trolls,’ ‘get off Twitter,’ logout! I just found it like, ‘No why should I? I’m not the aggressor here.’ And then to become a soldier has been much preferable to me and more aligned to who I am.

While [Haffajee maintains](#) that she received peer support from her colleagues, including male journalists, when she was targeted online, this is not the case for all women journalists who experience online violence. Kate Skinner admits that while SANEF established a relationship with the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) to provide support to journalists under duress, it does so imperfectly. According to Rebecca Davis, “The kind of mental health support for journalists is horrific. I mean, it’s just non-existent considering the kind of trauma that journalists are routinely exposed to.”

Notably however, the *Daily Maverick* has arranged the services of a counselor who is permanently available to all of its journalists whenever they are in need of psychological care.

10. The response from Twitter to the abuse

“We created this space, we created social media and then we let people weaponize it.”

- Branko Brkic, 2020

According to Ferial Haffajee, prior to South-African born Elon Musk taking over the platform in October 2022, her experience on Twitter had improved somewhat due to minor technical changes made by the platform. “My life on Twitter is much better because they’ve allowed a new functionality where you can determine who can reply to you. And that’s cleaned up the platform in my own experience,” [Haffajee said](#) in December 2020.

However, even before the evolution of Twitter to “X” and the abolition of the Trust and Safety team, she felt that there was still a lack of urgency on Twitter’s part. For instance, Haffajee repeatedly reported death threats via Twitter but the response she received was generally either nonexistent or inadequate. On one occasion, Haffajee reported that a Twitter user had threatened to shoot her. [She recalls](#), “The Twitter office came back to me and said it’s [the death threat] entirely aligned with the freedom of speech standards, and that it was okay language and behavior on Twitter.”

Moreover, Haffajee [said in 2021](#) that she was concerned that social media platforms give scant attention or priority when they receive reports about abusive content on their platforms from complainants in the Global South. In her experience, when she has reported abuse to Twitter, and received a human response to her complaint, it has been handled with a dearth of urgency by a call center agent.

The platforms are simply not hearing us. Because often those of us who sit in the South can't access the true power in Silicon Valley. We are inevitably going to knock up against people in a sweatshop who are badly paid and who can't be activists on our behalf and take those complaints through to anywhere that would make them matter.

In 2020 Haffajee did successfully convince Twitter to remove two of her abusers from the platform. In liaising with Twitter on this matter, between she was required to cite Twitter's own hate speech policy before the platform relented and removed the abusive users. Haffajee [maintains](#) that Big Tech companies ought to bear a great deal of the responsibility in combating online violence, and has taken an activist's stance on the issue:

We have every right to expect a greater accountability from the platforms. And so now I very much consider myself an activist for building that kind of accountability because the way the platforms treat us, when we as users are part of their success, is absolutely pathetic. I do think the greatest responsibility does lie with the platforms because they're transnational and they're global and they're enormously powerful... This is a global issue that needs to be taken up with the companies.

While the platforms continue to claim that it would be near technically impossible to monitor and regulate abuse, threats and harassment at scale, Rebecca Davis argues that this position should be regarded with suspicion. "I don't agree with the tech companies that it is so difficult. I think there's an obvious financial incentive for them not to fix these issues because of the way in which strongly worded sentiment rises to the top, which does not have to be the case."

Editor-in-Chief of the *Daily Maverick* Branko Brkic argues that when we recognize that these platforms are in fact publishers, we then need to regard their content contributors not merely as users, but rather as billions of (unpaid) freelancers who are all 'working' for a publisher. As he said in his 2020 interview:

As a publisher I could never absolve myself from responsibility for what goes into my publication. All I want them to do is have the same rules as I do. And suddenly, the picture would be completely different. The problem is that if they had to do what we do, they wouldn't have to hire 20,000 fact checkers. They would have to hire more than two million fact checkers. And suddenly, this stuff isn't such a good business for them. Their entire business model would have to change, which obviously they're not going to do. They're going to destroy humanity.

POSTSCRIPT

This Big Data Case Study is one of a series in production focusing on emblematic cases of gendered online violence, examining the core of digital attacks through computational analysis of millions of social media accounts blended with contextual research, to provide hard evidence to demonstrate the lived experience of journalists under attack online. This report was produced as part of a broader project investigating the development of an Online Violence Alert and Response System. To that end, the research is investigating the two-way trajectory between online and offline attacks and developing open-source digital tools to detect, monitor and alert key responders to high-risk cases.

FURTHER RESOURCES:

- [“Maria Ressa: Fighting an Onslaught of Online Violence”](#) (2021), the first major Big Data Case Study of its kind focused on the torrent of online violence facing women journalists who work on the new front line of journalism safety, at the epicenter of digital age risks, by ICFJ and the University of Sheffield.
- Read [further ICFJ Big Data Case Studies](#) on journalists Carole Cadwalladr (UK), Rana Ayyub (India), Ghada Oueiss (Lebanon/Qatar), Carmen Aristegui (Mexico).
- [The Chilling: A Global Study On Online Violence Against Women Journalists](#) (2022), a groundbreaking global study on online violence against women journalists that includes over 100 recommendations for action, published by ICFJ and UNESCO.
- [“A global snapshot of the incidence and impacts of online violence against women journalists”](#) (2020), based on a survey conducted by ICFJ and UNESCO.
- Posetti, J., Maynard D. and Shabbir, N. 2023. [Guidelines for monitoring online violence against female journalists](#), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and ICFJ.
- [Online Violence Response Hub](#), founded by IWWMF and ICFJ as a project of the Coalition Against Online Violence (CAOV).

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About ICFJ:

ICFJ empowers journalists to produce news reports that lead to better governments, stronger economies, more vibrant societies and healthier lives. ICFJ also helps improve the working lives of journalists through 'action research' collaborations on the safety of women journalists, disinformation and trust, and journalism in a post-pandemic world.



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