

Kenya's keyboard warriors

How opposing online groups coordinated to amplify political narratives against each other on social media



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of contents	2
Glossary	3
Executive Summary (What's the story?)	4
The Authors	5
The context	8
The network	9
Chronological mapping series	14
First Cluster	14
Second Cluster	21
Conclusion	28

Glossary

Detailed descriptions and explanations of terms and abbreviations relevant to this report are listed below. These descriptions and explanations serve to clarify the usage in our report and are not intended to be authoritative.

Term	Description
ANCIR	African Network of Centres for Investigative Reporting
BBI	The Building Bridges Initiative
CfA	Code for Africa
iCC	International Criminal Court
NMS	Nairobi Metropolitan Services

Executive summary: What's the story?

How opposing online groups coordinated to amplify political narratives against each other on social media

by CfA

Over the past decade, social networking sites have grown into an important part of political discussions. Offline political conversations often spill into the digital realm, at times creating room for the circulation of specific narratives that are intended to paint different sides of a country's political conversation in a negative light.

Kenya is no exception. Over the course of six days in January 2021 five different hashtags on Twitter spread narratives against the different sides of Kenya's often fraught political divide. These discussions began after a radio interview given by President Uhuru Kenyatta, during which he discussed various issues of national importance. A CfA investigation revealed a case of coordinated amplification amongst these hashtags. Two distinct narratives were identified: one against President Kenyatta and another against Deputy President William Ruto. The relationship between the two men is rocky - a very high profile example of the sort of divisive politics that has marked Kenya for years. **sometimes with violent results.**

The narrative against the president used the hashtags #UhuruPettyLies and #UhuruNMSLoot27B, criticising Kenyatta for his involvement in controversial former Nairobi Governor Mike Sonko's impeachment, as well as branding the Nairobi Metropolitan Services as nothing more than a scheme to siphon public funds. These trends resulted in 718 tweets and 5,627 retweets over two days.

The second cluster used the hashtags #ClassWarLoading, #ICCWatchlist and #RutoReturnOurMoney, with a narrative that criticised Ruto for his reported involvement in past public development scandals. These tweets also brought up his previous charges at the International Criminal Court - these were ultimately **dismissed.** These trends resulted in 947 tweets and 5,255 retweets over three days.

The Authors

Code for Africa (CfA) is the continent's largest network of non-profit independent civic technology and open data laboratories, with teams of full-time technologists and analysts in 13 African countries. CfA's laboratories build digital democracy solutions that give citizens unfettered access to actionable information to improve citizens' ability to make informed decisions, and to strengthen civic engagement for improved public governance and accountability.

The African Network of Centres for Investigative Reporting (ANCIR) is a CfA initiative that brings together the continent's best investigative newsrooms, ranging from large traditional mainstream media to smaller specialist units. ANCIR member newsrooms investigate crooked politicians, organised crime and big business. The iLAB is ANCIR's in-house digital forensic team of data scientists and investigative specialists who spearhead investigations that individual newsrooms are unable to tackle on their own. This includes forensic analysis of suspected digital disinformation campaigns aimed at misleading citizens or triggering social discord or polarisation using hate speech or radicalisation or other techniques.

The iLAB subscribes to CfA's guiding principles:

1. **We show what's possible.** Digital democracy can be expensive. We seek to be a catalyst by lowering the political risk of experimentation by creating successful proofs-of-concept for liberating civic data, for building enabling technologies and for pioneering sustainable revenue models. We also seek to lower the financial costs for technology experimentation by creating and managing 'shared' backbone civic technology and by availing resources for rapid innovation.
2. **We empower citizens.** Empowering citizens is central to our theory of change. Strong democracies rely on engaged citizens who have actionable information and easy-to-use channels for making their will known. We therefore work primarily with citizen organisations and civic watchdogs, including the media. We also support government and social enterprises to develop their capacity to meaningfully respond to citizens and to effectively collaborate with citizens.
3. **We are action oriented.** African societies are asymmetric. The balance of power rests with governments and corporate institutions, at the expense of citizens. Citizens are treated as passive recipients of consultation or services. We seek to change this by focusing on actionable data and action-orientated tools that give 'agency' to citizens.

4. **We operate in public.** We promote openness in our work and in the work of our partners. All of our digital tools are open source and all our information is open data. We actively encourage documentation, sharing, collaboration, and reuse of both our own tools, programmes, and processes, as well as those of partners.
5. **We help build ecosystems.** We actively marshal resources to support the growth of a pan-African ecosystem of civic technologists. Whenever possible we reuse existing tools, standards and platforms, encouraging integration and extension. We operate as a pan-African federation of organisations who are active members of a global community, leveraging each other's knowledge and resources, because all of our work is better if we are all connected.

This report was authored by the iLAB's team, consisting of investigative manager **Allan Cheboi**, data analysts **Christian Ngnie** and **Jean Githae** and data technologist **Robin Kiplangat**. The report was edited by senior programme manager **Amanda Strydom** and deputy CEO **Chris Roper**, copy-edited by **Natasha Joseph** and approved for publication by CEO **Justin Arenstein**.



The context

Over the past two years, the relationship between Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and Deputy President William Ruto has deteriorated. This rift began after **‘the handshake’** of March 2018, when President Kenyatta and former Prime Minister Raila Odinga agreed to cease hostilities and find a common ground in the interest of maintaining peace and stability. At the time, the country had been plagued by months of **divisive politics following the 2017 general election.**

That famous handshake led to the **Building Bridges Initiative Report (BBI)** which detailed a series of recommendations on unifying the country. The BBI has proposed a set of constitutional reforms that include a hybrid system of government, with a president and prime minister. The runner-up of the presidential elections would receive a seat in parliament as the official leader of the opposition. The report also proposes the appointment of cabinet ministers from the National Assembly - a law which existed, but was repealed in 2010 - and the allocation of more funds to county governments.

The Deputy President has been vocal in **his opposition** to certain clauses of the report, particularly on the expansion of the executive. He questioned how the BBI would address political inclusivity, given that the Prime Minister and their deputies would be presidential appointees. He also questioned a proposal to have political parties participate in the appointment of commissioners of the electoral commission, a move which he compared to competing teams appointing their referee. The Deputy President made his sentiments known during the public launch of the BBI report, which had **the crowd** calling for him to ‘respect the president’.

Alongside the BBI discussion, political conversations have also revolved around the ‘hustler versus dynasty’ narrative. This narrative, which is viewed as **divisive** in some quarters, describes the Deputy President’s camp as hustlers who understand the plight of the everyday citizen, while branding the President’s camp as a dynasty, who have grown in privilege and power.

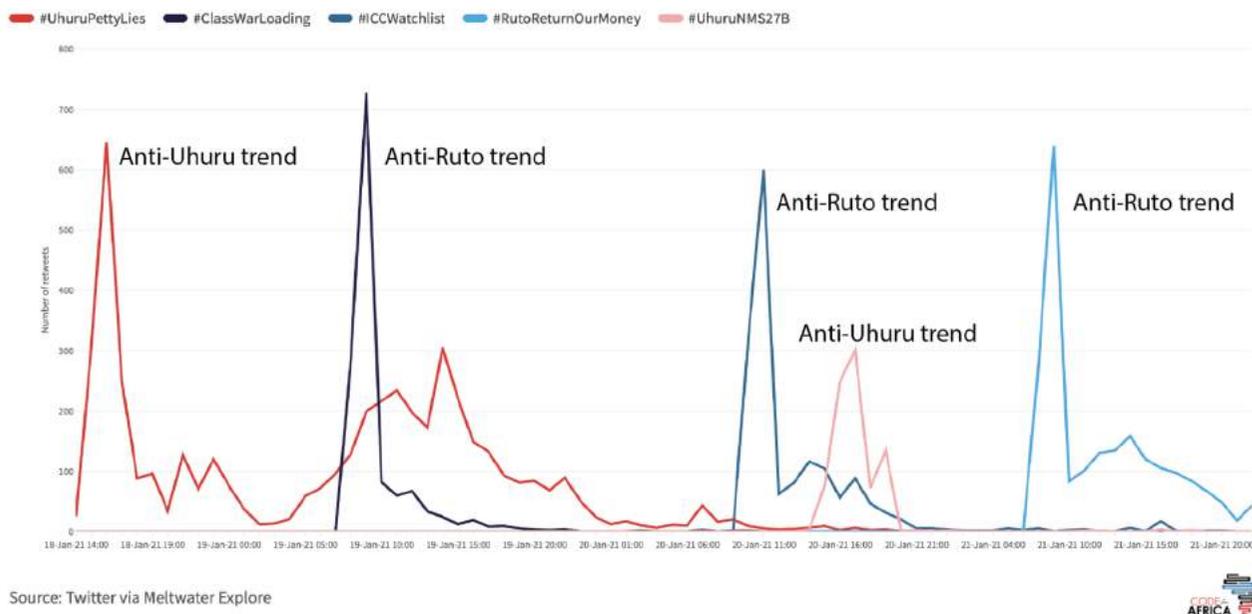
On 18 January 2021, Inooro, Kameme and Gukena radio stations broadcast an hour-long interview with President Kenyatta. He addressed various issues, among them the BBI and the ‘hustler vs dynasty’ narrative. These stations broadcast in Kikuyu, the President’s native language; some criticism was leveled at the fact that he spoke on matters of national importance in a language that is not common to all Kenyans. The interview also addressed the **impeachment** of former Nairobi Governor Mike Sonko. Sonko’s impeachment in December 2020 ended a tumultuous term, marked by his frequent disagreements with the county government, the national government and the hasty resignation of the deputy governor in 2017.

The network

Between 18 January and 23 January 2021, a series of trending hashtags on Twitter sparked conversations about various political issues facing the country. The first hashtag, #UhuruPettyLies, praised Sonko and criticised the president's leadership. The second hashtag, #ClassWarLoading, mentioned a looming 'class war' based on the hustler and dynasty narrative. The third hashtag, #ICCWatchList, focused on Ruto's **past charges** at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the hustler versus dynasty narrative. The fourth hashtag, #UhuruNMS27B, focused on the Nairobi Metropolitan Services, claiming that it was behind the looting of public funds. The final hashtag, #RutoReturnOurMoney, highlighted Ruto's involvement in past scandals. In total, the hashtags received a total of 12,525 interactions on Twitter. This comprised 1643 tweets and 10,882 retweets from 4,616 unique accounts.

A network analysis revealed two **distinct clusters within the network**; an anti-Ruto cluster, which used the hashtags #ClassWarLoading, #ICCWatchlist and #RutoReturnOurMoney and an anti-Uhuru cluster, which used the hashtags #UhuruNMSLoot27B and #UhuruPettyLies.

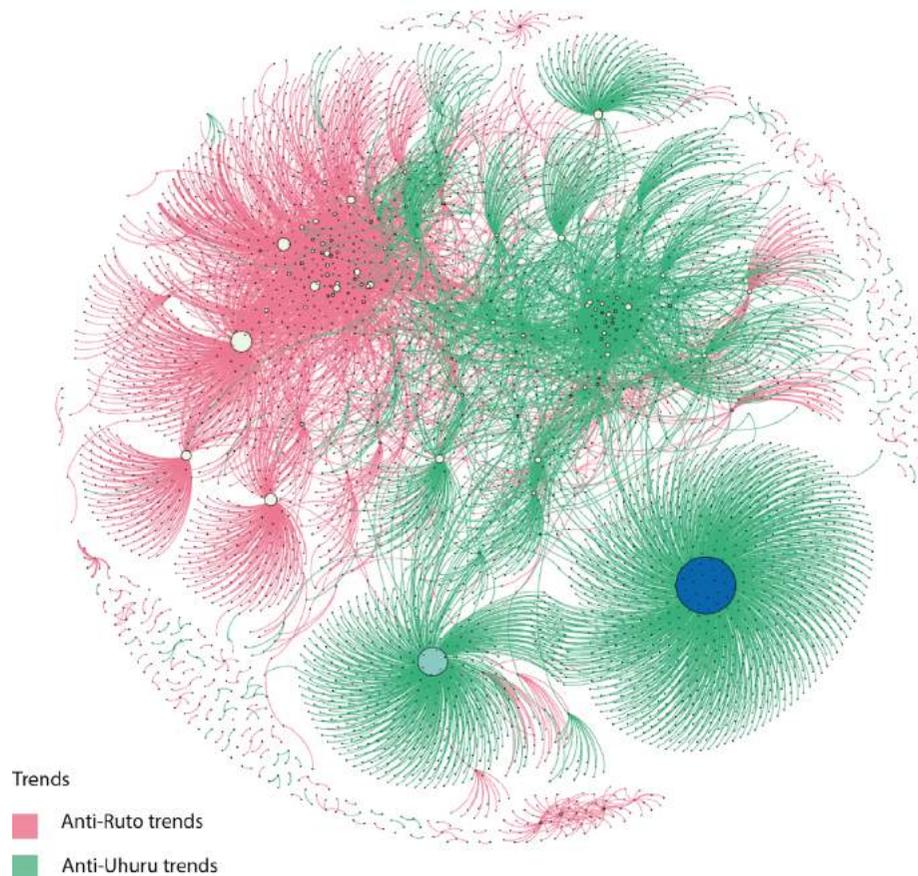
Timeline of posts



Network analysis of accounts that retweeted using the hashtags #ClassWarLoading, #ICCWatchlist, #RutoReturnOurMoney, #UhuruNMSLoot27B and #UhuruPettyLies (Source CfA via Gephi)

The timing of these hashtags, especially so quickly after the radio interview, as well as the distinct clusters of accounts, point to a coordinated campaign, designed to discredit each other.

Using **Gephi** the iLAB visualised the entire network and noted that there were two distinct clusters as shown below. We also identified key accounts that participated in each cluster and the most popular narratives being shared using the identified Twitter hashtags.



Network analysis of accounts that retweeted using the hashtags (Source CFA via Gephi)

The accounts listed below had the most interaction rates on Twitter for each cluster.

Top 10 Twitter profiles with the most interaction rates in the network Anti-Uhuru Cluster

Account	Number of Retweets	Account creation date	Following	Followers
MigunaTEAM	937	30 Apr 2018	393	3318
PeterRatemo4	525	19 Jan 2019	5065	5782
cherylperis1	214	30 Jul 2020	219	192
SILLY1G	190	23 Aug 2019	291	358
malequeen7	182	29 Sept 2020	1185	8500
_mwendee	150	22 May 2020	380	2092
ChilliChrisborn	146	14 Aug 2020	4	102
crazy_tenant	145	9 Oct 2020	1089	5079
pitah01	134	2 Dec 2017	571	1553
precious_muoki	125	7 Dec 2020	38	778

Account information of the most retweeted accounts in the anti-Uhuru cluster (Source: [CfA](#) via Twitter)

An assessment of the most retweeted accounts under the anti-Uhuru cluster shows that the majority are run by individual(s) who support Ruto.



Top 10 Twitter profiles with the most interaction rates in the network Anti-Ruto Cluster

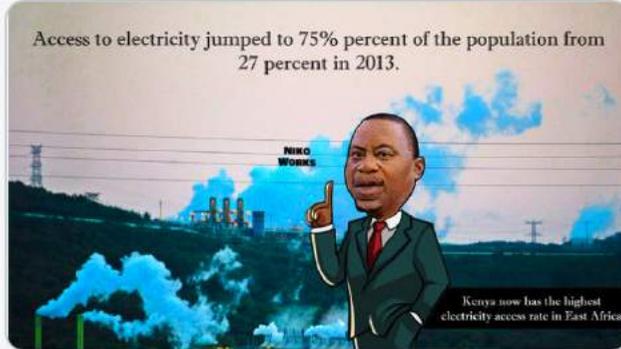
Account	Number of Retweets	Account Creation date	Following	Followers
Chemutai_254	459	11 Jan 2020	1654	11,939
KisiiCool	403	10 Aug 2019	8568	16134
ItsKIOKOH	201	19 Apr 2020	3997	2396
IkeOjuok	181	14 Jun 2013	333	104,888
ongondo_	168	24 Apr 2014	20032	19,870
dylantwiz	163	04 Apr 2020	3444	2633
Lynne_Soi	151	16 May 2019	10,142	10,240
JamalMagak	142	29 Apr 2015	2593	2853
Spiicyy1	137	22 Jun 2020	2151	1737
RossaChemutai	122	Oct 2020	1733	970

Account information of the most retweeted accounts in the anti-Ruto cluster (Source: [CFA](#) via Twitter)



Chemutai Purity @Chemutai_254 · Aug 16, 2020 ...
 President **Uhuru** Kenyatta is the greatest president Kenya will ever have!
 ✓He has build hospitals all over Kenya,
 ✓Education is free from nursery to university,
 ✓Over 75% of households in Kenya are connected to electricity

#ImpossibleIsNOTHING



1 1 3



KISII COOL @KisiiCool · Jan 8 ...
 Kisii county have no been left behind under president **Uhuru** Kenyatta.

This is Kisii bypass the current state and the previous one, we can clearly note the difference.

Asante sana **Uhuru** Kenyatta hata kama Ruto alikuhepa.

#UhuruDeliversWithoutRuto



9 34 56

Chronological mapping series

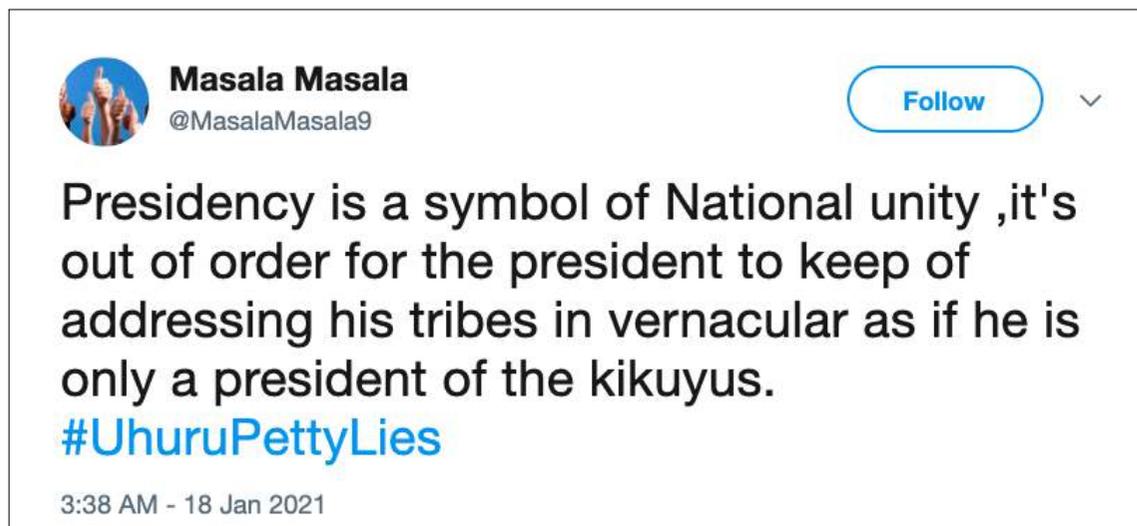
The hustler cluster

#UhuruPettyLies

The #UhuruPettyLies trend began on 18 January 2021, after President Kenyatta's interview on Inooro, Kameme and Gukena radio stations. During this interview, the President **mentioned** that he was behind Sonko's removal from office. The President attributed this move to the governor's persistent wrangles with county government officials. He also mentioned that he had helped the former governor win his seat but that, ultimately, Sonko was "up and about doing nothing".

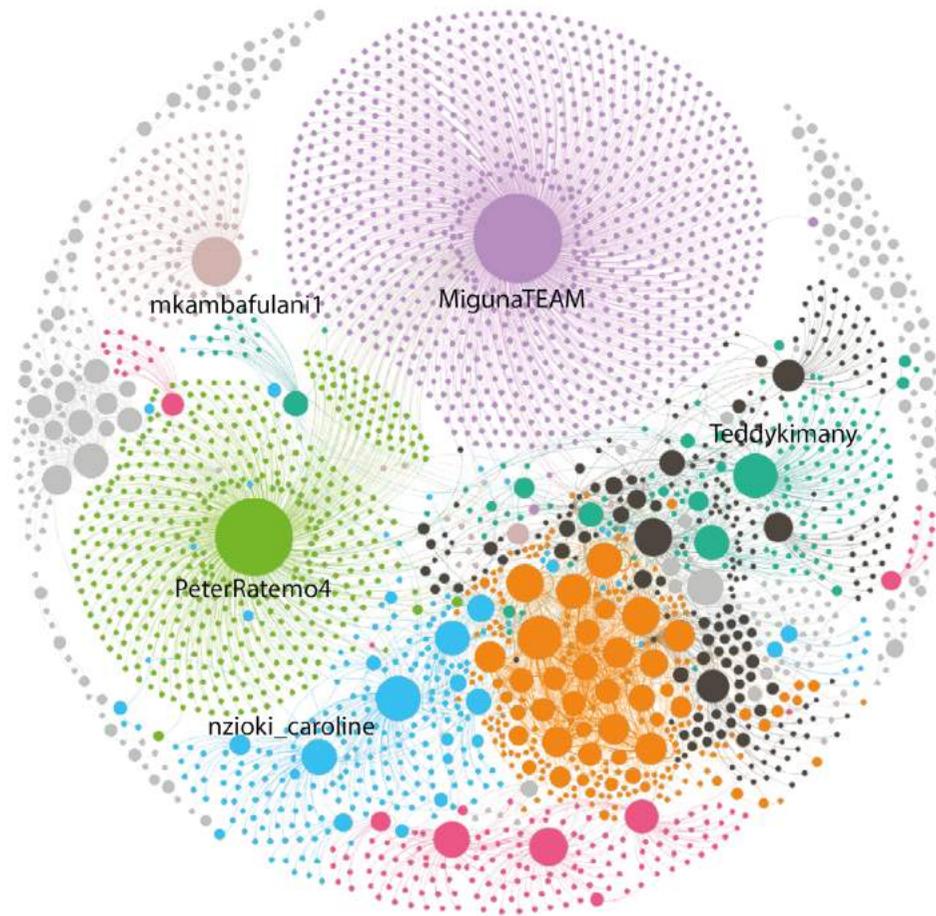
In the hours following this interview, Mike Sonko released a **statement** on his Facebook page, strongly opposing the President's words. Sonko stated that the President was not behind his election victory and claimed that he had, within the early days of his term, cracked down on the public-resource looting cartels that had held Nairobi hostage for decades. He mentioned that he had inherited a run-down city with an endemic culture of looting public resources; he blamed this on Margaret Kenyatta - the President's half sister - who was the Mayor of Nairobi between 1970 and 1976.

Shortly after this post, a **tweet** criticising the President for conducting an interview in his native language initiated a conversation that resulted in this trend. The conversations in this trend praised Sonko's leadership and criticised the President for his role in removing Sonko from office



This trend garnered 4,782 retweets from 2,484 unique accounts. A network analysis of the retweets under this trend revealed two main clusters centered around accounts named MigunaTEAM and PeterRatemo4.

A network visualisation of the hashtag, as shown below, revealed that the two accounts had the most interactions on the network.



Network analysis of accounts that retweeted using the hashtag #UhuruPettyLies (Source [CfA](#) via Gephi)

These key clusters had tweets that followed a mechanism we define as ‘poll-based amplification strategy’, in which users are asked to retweet in favour of one side and like in favour of the other.



Tweets from @MigunaTEAM and @PeterRatemo4 using the hashtag #UhuruPettyLies (Source CFA via Twitter)

#UhuruNMSLoot27B

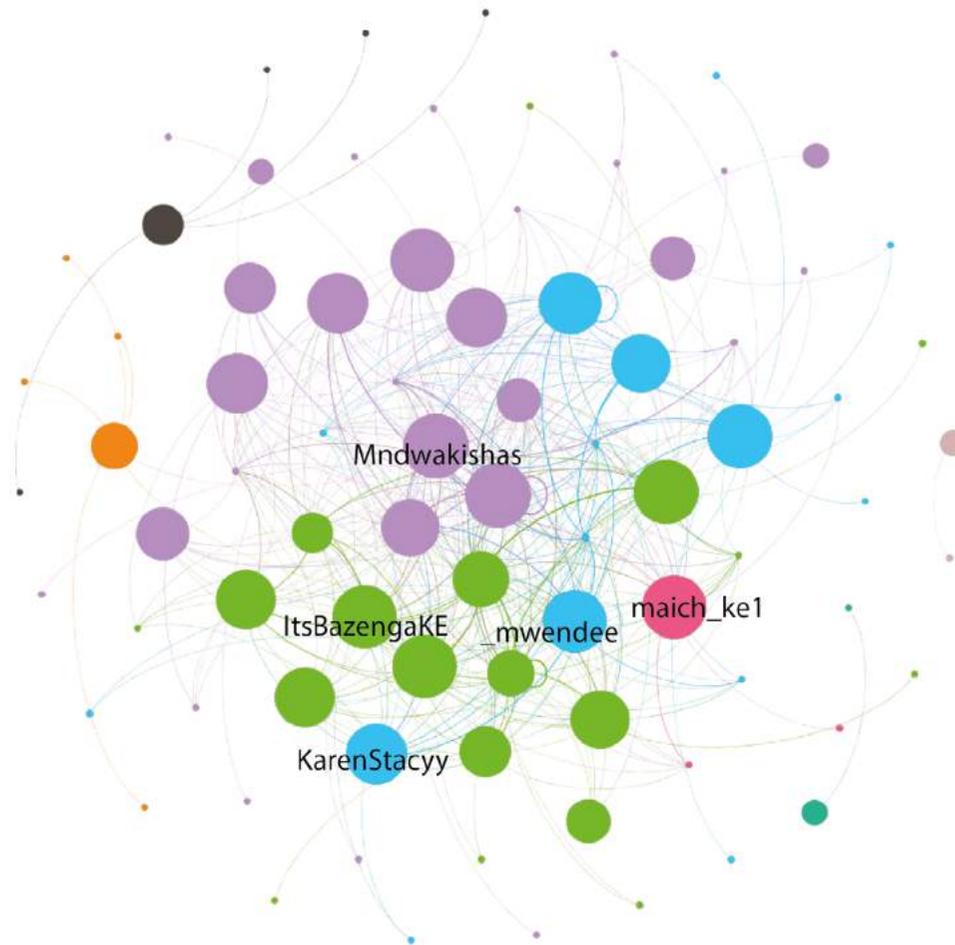
The #UhuruNMSLoot27B trend began on 20 January 2021, with narratives that claimed the Nairobi Metropolitan Services (NMS) were looting public funds. In February 2020, the Nairobi County Government transferred its health, transport, public works, planning & development functions to the national government. These services are now offered by the Nairobi Metropolitan Services. In October 2020, NMS and the county government were in a stalemate over budgetary allocations, following Sonko's rejection of the county's 2020/2021 Ksh37.7 billion Appropriation Bill. This bill allocated Ksh 27.1 billion to the NMS, Ksh.6.4 billion to Sonko's administration and the remaining Ksh 2 billion to the county assembly. Sonko stated that he was rejecting this because the proposed budget would leave a deficit. He wanted the county assembly to reduce the budget to Ksh31.6 billion, to tally with the County Fiscal Strategy Paper 2020/2021. This stalemate was resolved after Sonko's impeachment when Acting Governor Benson Mutura assented to the bill.

The trend began with a tweet which claimed that the NMS was unconstitutional and contributed to the looting of public funds.

The conversations in this trend claimed that Sonko was impeached to give space to cartels who wanted to loot public funds. This trend resulted in 845 retweets from 68 unique accounts.



A network visualisation of the hashtag, as shown below, revealed which accounts had the most interactions on the network.



Network analysis of accounts that retweeted using the hashtag #UhuruNMSLoot27B (Source [CfA](#) via Gephi)

The timing and narrative of these trends suggested a coordinated effort to praise Sonko while discrediting the president and the NMS. A network analysis of these two trends highlighted this; revealing a tight cluster of accounts participating in both trends.

Top 10 Twitter profiles with the most interaction rates in the network UhuruPettyLies trend

Accounts	Number of Retweets	Account creation date	Following	Followers
MigunaTEAM	937	30 Apr 2018	393	3318
PeterRatemo4	525	19 Jan 2019	5065	5782
SILLY1G	190	23 Aug 2019	291	358
cherylperis1	163	30 Jul 2020	219	192
crazy_tenant	121	9 Oct 2020	1089	5079
Mkambafulani1	117	20 Jan 2020	142	55
malequeen7	112	29 Sept 2020	1185	8500
pitah01	108	2 Dec 2017	571	1553
_mwendee	107	22 May 2020	380	2092
_princess254	103	21 Dec 2020	147	2636

Account information of the most retweeted accounts in the UhuruPettyLies trend (Source: [CfA](#) via Twitter)

Top 10 Twitter profiles with the most interaction rates in the network UhuruNMSLoot27B trend

Accounts	Number of Retweets	Account creation date	Following	Followers
malequeen7	70	29 Sept 2020	1185	8500
Mndwakishas	66	23 Dec 2020	17	37
ChilliChrisborn	54	14 Aug 2020	4	101
itsBazengaKE	53	11 Jan 2020	33	74
cherylperis1	51	30 Jul 2020	219	192
Divinah89292732	45	19 Aug 2020	66	155
_mwendee	43	22 May 2020	380	2092
KomradeRichard	37	16 Oct 2020	252	257
precious_muoki	35	07 Dec 2020	50	1161
maich_ke1	34	01 Sep 2019	2806	5774

Account information of the most retweeted accounts in the UhuruNMSLoot27B trend (Source: [CfA](#) via Twitter)

The dynasty cluster

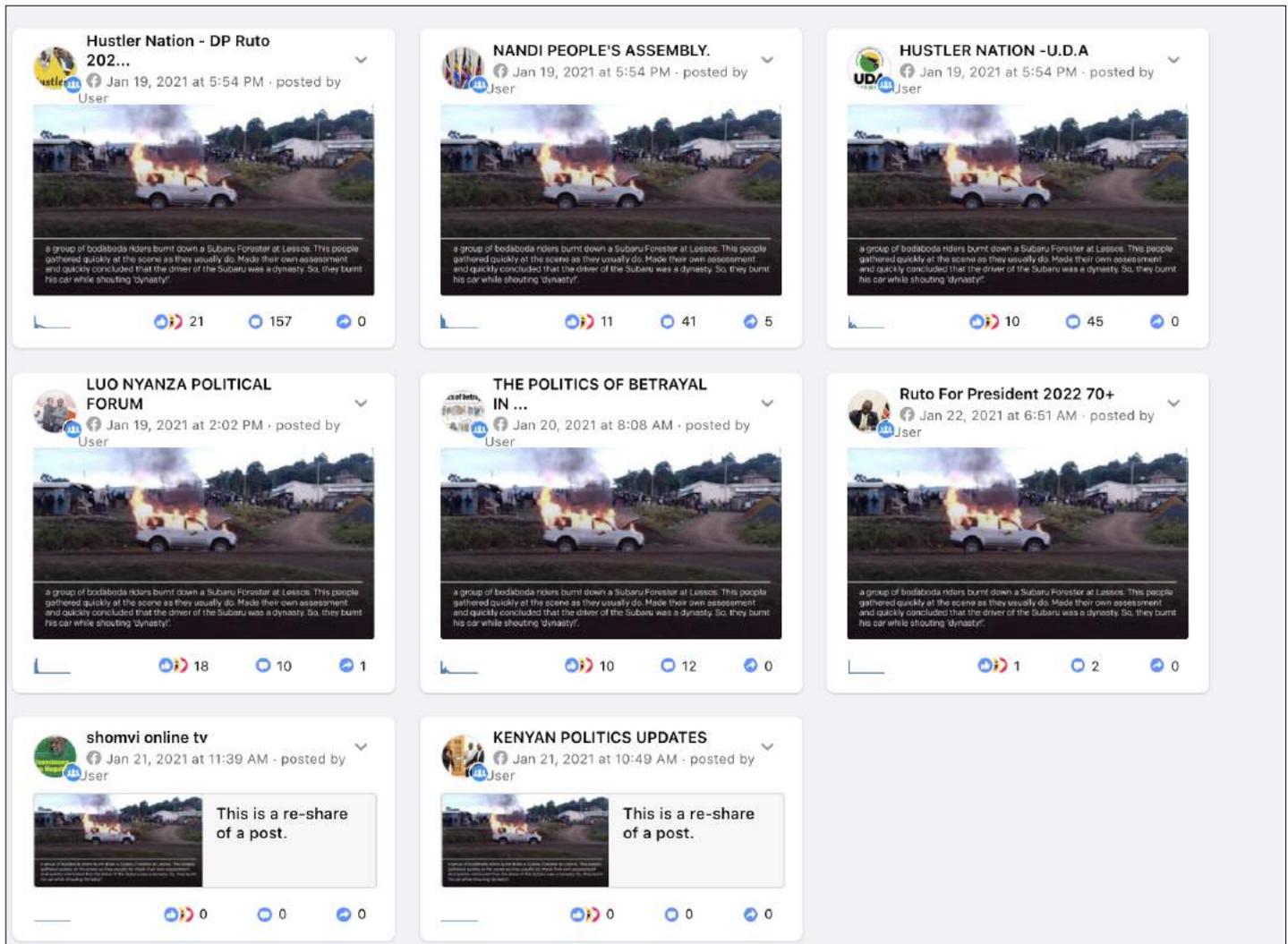
#ClassWarLoading

On 19 January 2021, a conversation under the hashtag #ClassWarLoading began trending after President Kenyatta's interview on Inooro FM. In it, President Kenyatta **mentioned** that the 'hustler vs dynasty' political narrative being promoted by DP Ruto was divisive and could snowball into a class warfare if left unchecked. He **cited** an incident in which angry boda boda riders in Lessos, Nandi County, reportedly set a vehicle ablaze following an accident between the vehicle and a boda boda. This vehicle was allegedly set ablaze as the owner was a 'member of the dynasty'.

The trend began with **this tweet**, which revisited the 2018 handshake, mentioning that it continued despite Ruto's opposition to the gesture. This trend then picked up into conversations around the hustler and dynasty narrative, bringing attention to the **vehicle** allegedly set ablaze by 'hustler supporters'. Overall, this trend resulted in 245 tweets and 1,346 retweets from 556 accounts.

We observed a spillover of this trend to Facebook. The image of the burnt vehicle in Lessos was also shared in eight different public Facebook groups.

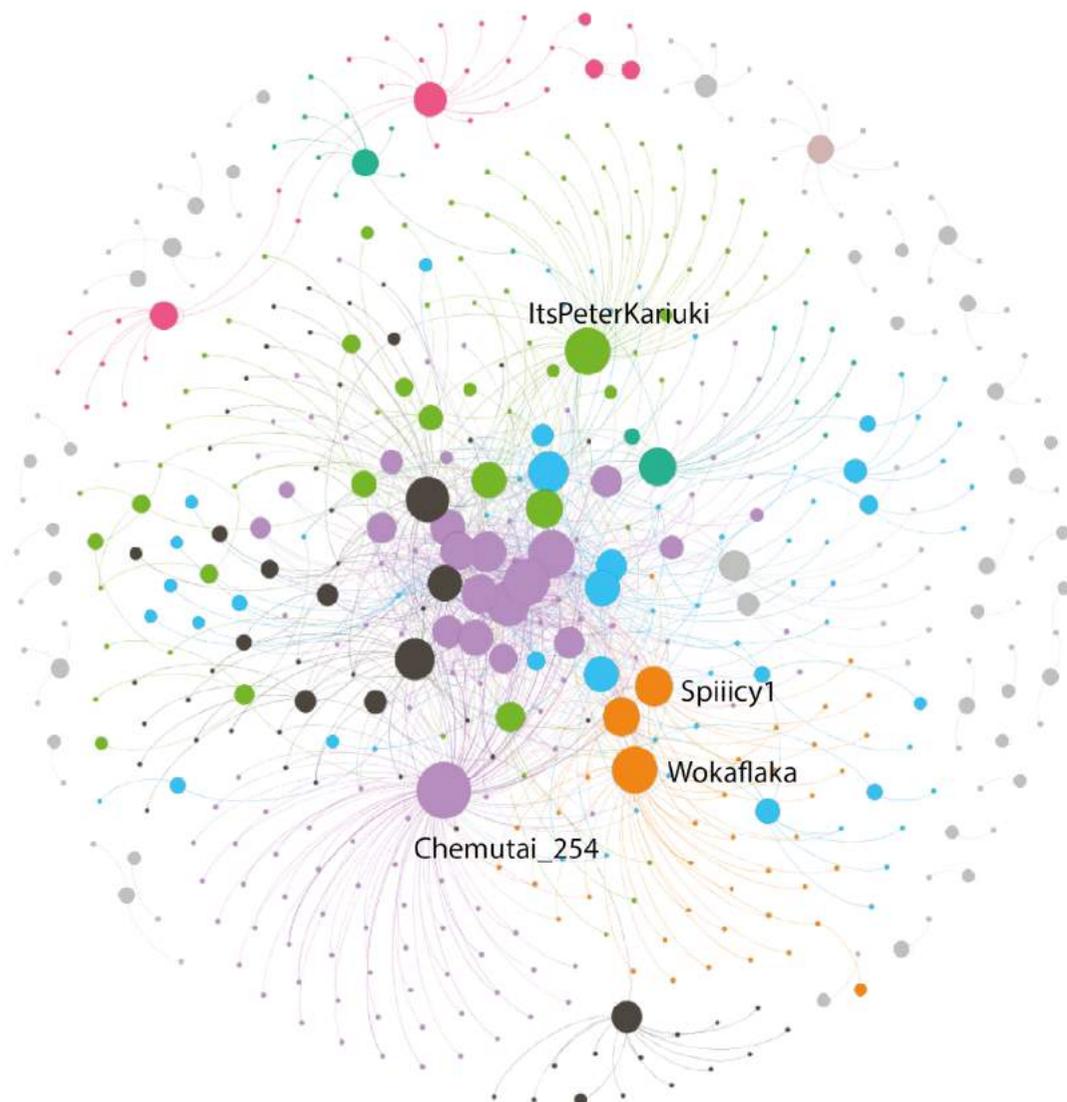




In this trend, we also identified a **video** of the Deputy President speaking in Nandi, his native language, with Kiswahili subtitles which translated that, “the people of Central don’t know me” and that he was “giving a final warning” and would “deal severely” with his opponents. The tweet accompanying the video stated that Ruto would deal with GEMA¹ people. The comments accompanying this tweet, which was retweeted 36 times, suggested that these subtitles were false, altered to suit the narrative and ultimately spread disinformation.

1 Gikuyu, Embu and Meru Association, an organisation created to advance the socio-political needs of the Gikuyu, Embu and Meru communities. This term is at times used to refer to the three communities.

Our investigation revealed that, indeed, these subtitles are false: in fact, Ruto talks about his political opponents, stating that they're seeking his downfall for their success. This video does not allude to the people of Central Kenya or issue a warning to anyone.

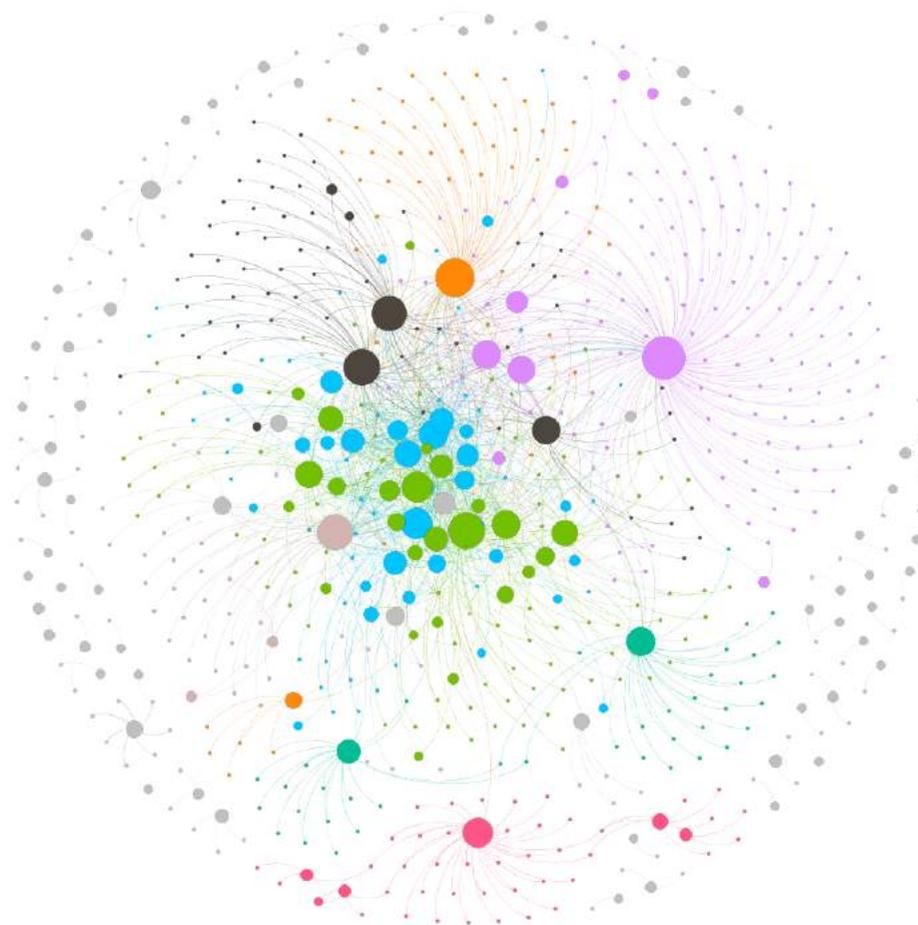


Network analysis of accounts that retweeted using the hashtag #ClassWarLoading (Source [CfA](#) via Gephi)

#ICCWatchList

On 20 January 2021, a conversation under the hashtag #ICCWatchlist began with [this tweet](#), which had a video of DP Ruto at a public gathering. The video begins with DP Ruto urging the crowd to seek government assistance to resolve community disputes. The tweet included a caption about the ‘hustler vs dynasty’ narrative, which was not alluded to in the video.

The narratives in this trend focused on DP Ruto’s [past charges](#) at the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the ‘hustler versus dynasty’ narrative. This trend resulted in 303 tweets and 1,589 retweets from 760 accounts.

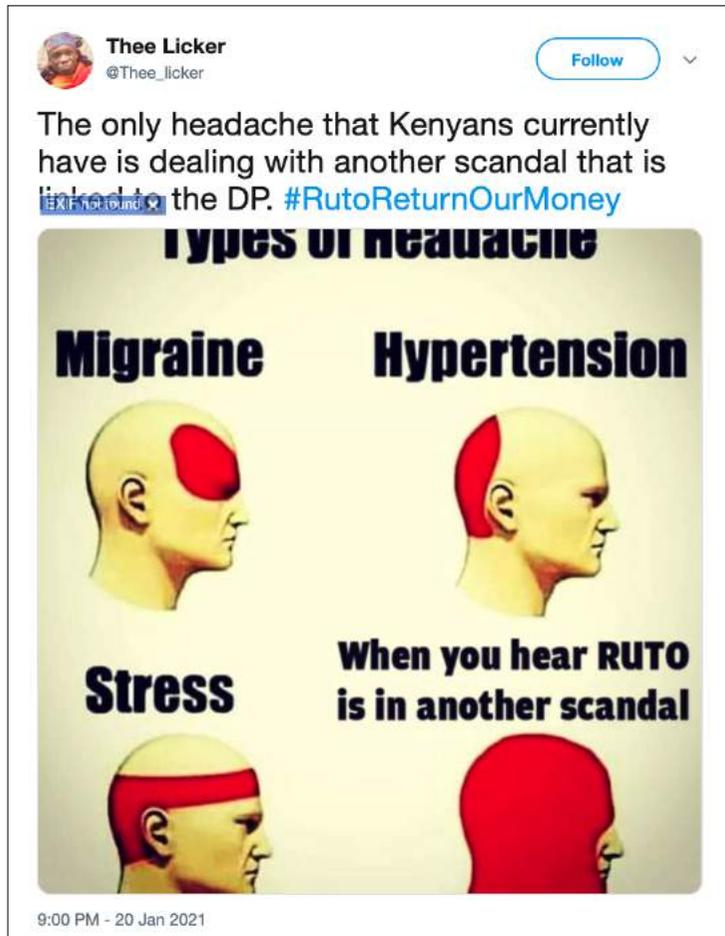


Network analysis of accounts that retweeted using the hashtag #ICCWatchList (Source [CfA](#) via Gephi)

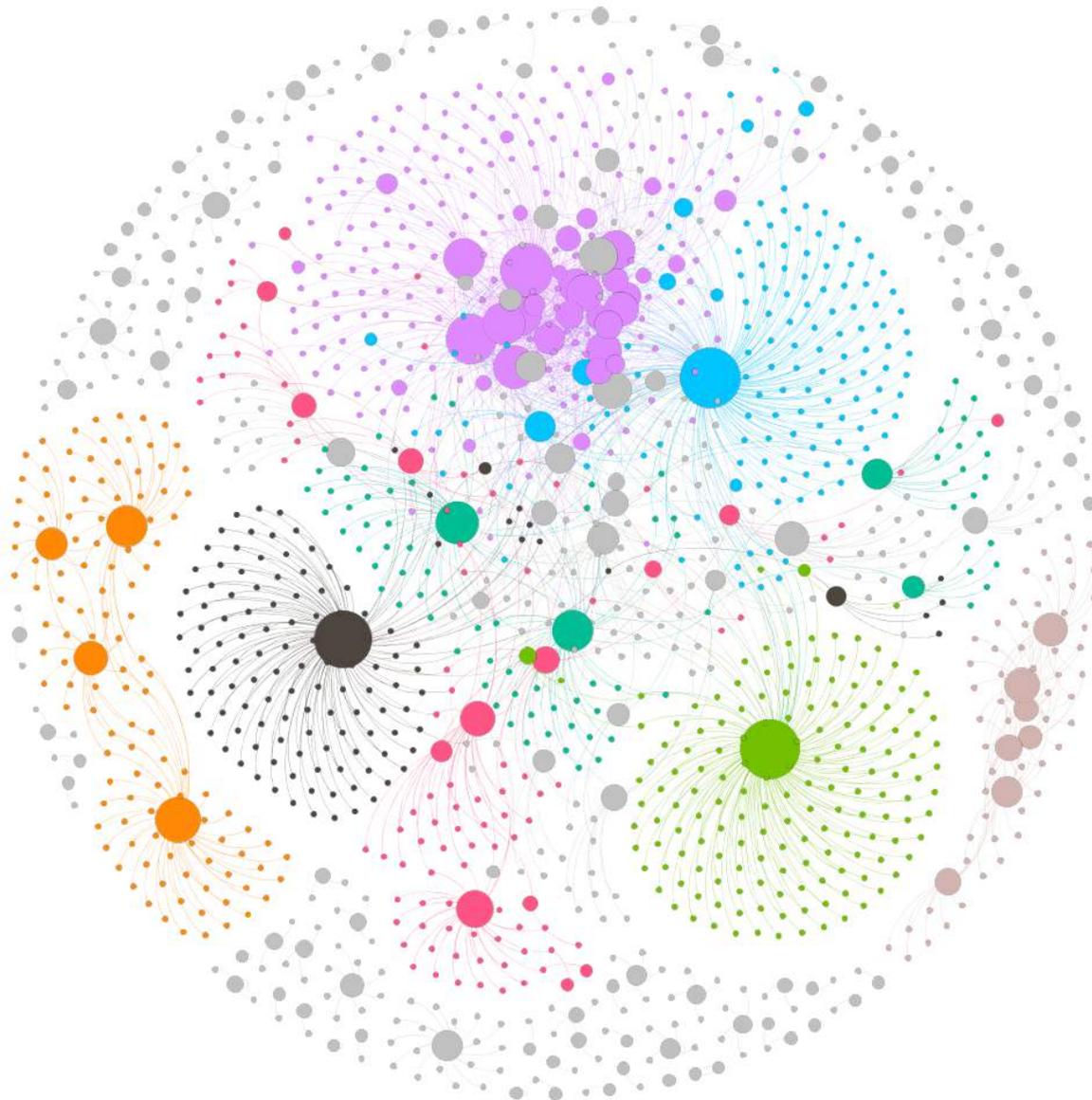
#RutoReturnOurMoney

On 21 January 2021, a conversation under the hashtag #RutoReturnOurMoney began with this [tweet](#) which mentioned DP Ruto's involvement in past scandals.

These were further highlighted in this [tweet](#), which compiled various newspaper headlines over the years that mentioned DP Ruto in different scandals

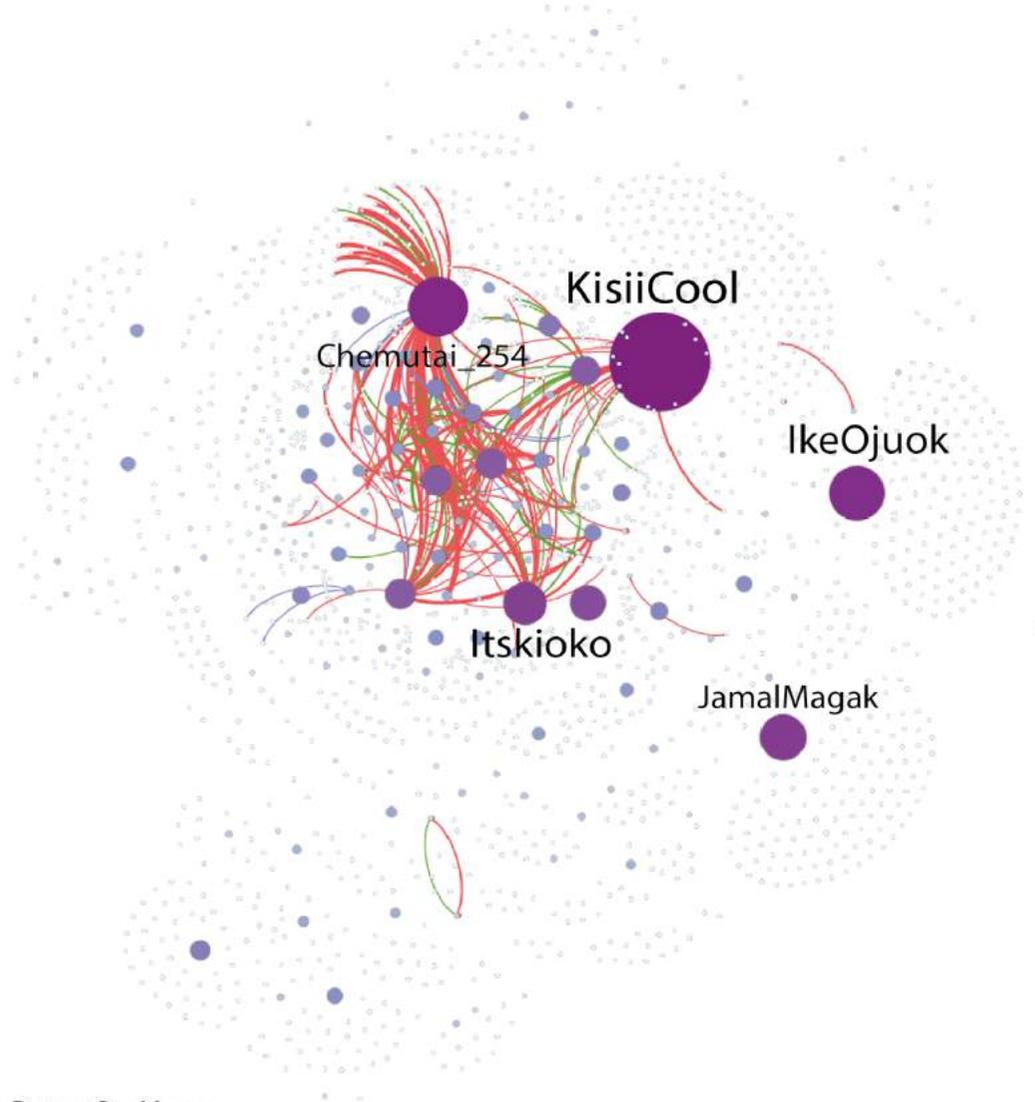


The video in this tweet allegedly shows the destruction that NUP supporters caused during the protests following Kyagulanyi's arrest on 18 November 2020
(Source: [CfA](#) via Twitter)



Network analysis of accounts that retweeted using the hashtag #RutoReturnOurMoney(Source [CfA](#) via Gephi)

The timing and narrative of these trends pointed to a coordinated effort to discredit the Deputy President. A network analysis of these three trends highlighted this; it revealed a tight cluster of accounts participating across the trends.



Trends

- RutoReturnOurMoney
- ClassWarLoading
- ICCWatchList

Network analysis of accounts that retweeted using the hashtag #ClassWarLoading, #RutoReturnOurMoney and #ICCWatchlist(Source [CfA](#) via Gephi)

Conclusion

This investigation identified two narratives in support of either side of Kenya's political divide. The instigators of these campaigns used a poll-based amplification strategy and disinformation to publicise their narratives. While the exact instigator of each campaign remains unknown, it is clear that each narrative was crafted in response to different elements of the president's interview and targeted the next presidential election. Given the past evidence of **coordinated conversations** during an election and the current fiery political climate, the findings of this investigation emphasise the need to constantly monitor social media platforms for these polarising conversations.

Published by

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