

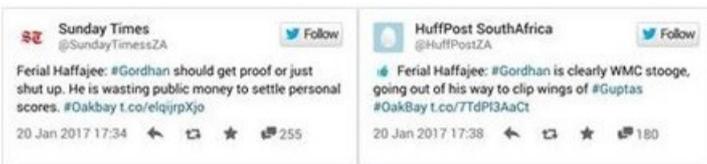
# How is fake news driving SA's political agendas?

On Friday 20 January 2017 the unwitting Twitter user may have been inclined to believe that respected South African journalists were suddenly squaring up against Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan.

At a quick glance, the first of these appeared to be from Radio 702 where financial journalists Alec Hogg and Peter Bruce were quoted expressing anti-Gordhan sentiments:



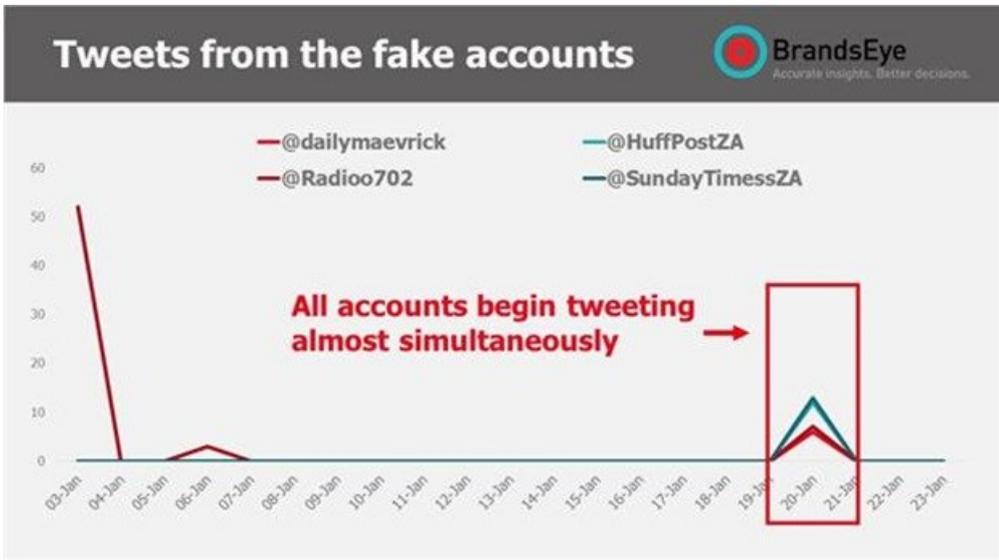
10 minutes later, these two posts were followed by Huffington Post South Africa seemingly quoting Ferial Haffajee's views against the minister and four minutes later a similar post appeared to come from the *Sunday Times*.



These accounts – despite their initial appearance, were in fact fake and all had “parody account” listed in their Twitter bios. The more astute users of this platform were quick to alert others, this was followed by allegations of “paid twitter” having a hand in it. The allegations that covert forces are operating on Twitter to defend certain individuals largely came to a head over the release of the State of Capture report in November 2016, and various researchers have tried to specifically identify those who aim to slander, amongst others, the Finance Minister. The Daily Maverick also published an [in-depth report](#) on these paid authors. More recently, following an [amaBhungane expose](#) on an alleged ANC “war room” during the 2016 local government elections, Shaka Sisulu is accused of being a member of “paid twitter”.

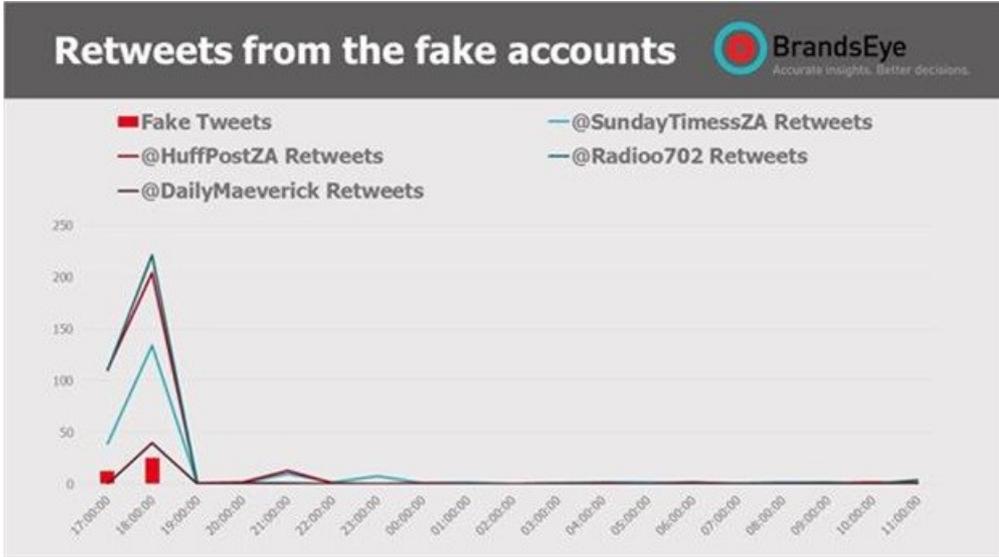
## A co-ordinated effort

These fake news accounts were relatively dormant before 20 January and the last tweets from any of them were on 6 January. On the 20th these accounts collectively published 38 tweets in the space of 50 minutes, and then nothing thereafter.



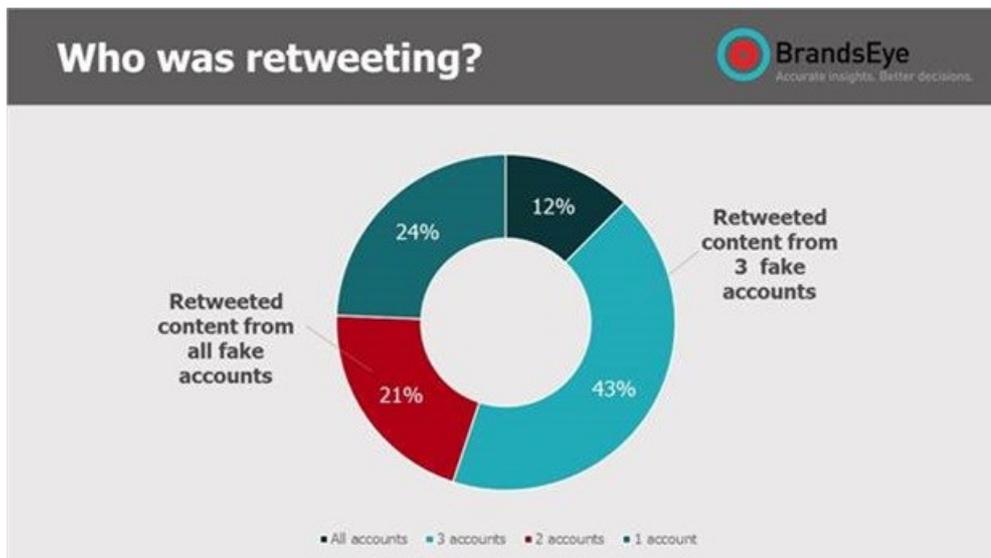
The mentions from these accounts were published between 16h49 and 17h38 and response to these tweets was quick – 92% of all the retweets happened in the first two hours after the content was posted.

The behaviour of those retweeting this fake content was also eerily similar in nature. There was a very strong positive correlation between their tweeting behaviour (where  $r > .87$ ). All these relationships were statistically significant – suggesting a highly co-ordinated effort.



Also, the authors that retweeted this content were mostly from one grouping of people. For instance, 43% of this group tweeted content from three out of four of these fake accounts, while a further 21% retweeted content from all of these

counterfeit accounts.

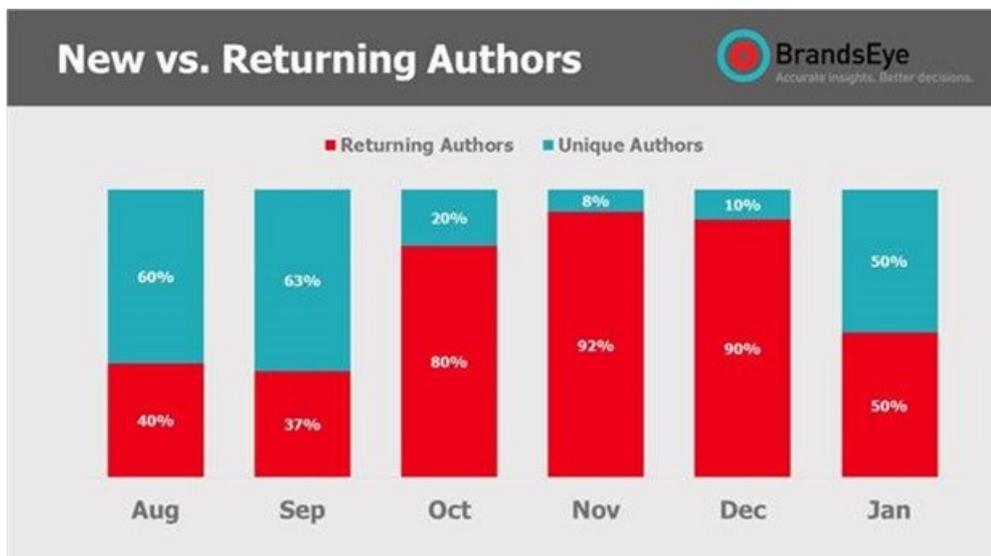


The strong correlation in behaviour and the clear overlap in authors again suggests that they were acting in unison to disseminate the fake content.

## Prolific political commentators

Using the above authors as a starting point, we distilled the overlapping authors into a list of 225. From 1 July 2016 to 23 January 2017 these authors have generated 87,829 mentions, this is an average of 390 mentions per author. One of the most prolific of these contributors had 1420 tweets in December – roughly 47 tweets per day.

What was striking analysing their activity over the past six months is that almost all of them were engaged in conversations over the November and December period – just after the State of Capture report had been released.



In other words, returning authors refers to those who had posted at least once in previous months. This group was most heavily deployed between October and November.

## What is their message?





Oakbay has [denied any involvement](#) in the fake news campaign.

Against a global background of fake news, alternative facts, and misinformation – the South African online space seems to be enacting what has become a world-wide trend. Particularly in the light of the alleged ANC War Room, South Africans need to keep an eye on potential forces covertly influencing news and social media for their own political ends.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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