

Dear Ms. Comrie,

Receive herewith my response to the comments and questions contained in the WhatsApp message that I have received from you, yesterday (Friday, 15 May 2020). I answer directly in the text of your message, in **bold italic red**.

I have taken the trouble to respond to your insinuations and leading questions in detail. I trust that you will publish my reply in full.

Sincerely,
Carl Niehaus

Dear Mr. Niehaus,

This is Susan Comrie from the amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism. We are writing an article about social media manipulation and would like to ask you for comment on the following:

We are aware that you were part of a WhatsApp group called Twitter Storm, set up in September 2018 by Transform RSA's Adil Nchabeleng. The purpose of the group appears to be to co-ordinate Twitter messaging amongst supporters of former President Jacob Zuma and prominent social media influencers, with the goal of fighting a factional battle within the ANC.

For example, when the Sunday Times ran a front page story about a covert meeting between former president Zuma and ANC secretary-general Ace Magashule, Ms. Phapano Pasha told the group: "Comrades today Sunday times is pushing serious Stratcom to divert us from the economic crisis...I suggest we focus on Sunday Times".

In response, you shared a tweet with the WhatsApp group where you accused Mr. Jackson Mthembu of "swallowing this stratcom propaganda of the Sunday Times hook-line-and-sinker".

Here you go again with your emotive and loaded language! The meeting at the Maharani Hotel in Durban between President Zuma, and the Secretary General of the ANC, comrade Ace Magashule, was NOT a 'covert meeting'. It was an open meeting between fellow comrades, who are senior members of the ANC in a very public place (a hotel!).

For malicious propaganda purposes the Sunday Times framed it as a 'covert meeting'. This was nothing else but fake news. That you still continue to try and perpetuate this fake news narrative, is yet another example of how you as journalists cooperate with each other, and coordinate, your propaganda in order to amplify it through your various news platforms. As such you are not behaving as journalists, but as political propagandists with pre-conceived and prejudiced political views. You are not writing news stories, you promote the political agendas of those who pay you. Sadly South Africa is cursed with some of the worst

journalists in the world, and the amaBungane Centre of 'Investigative' (what a misnomer!) Journalism, is one of the most sorry examples.

You are correct that in one of my sporadic tweets in the 'Twitter Storm' WhatsApp group I expressed my disappointment (in fact disgust) that comrade Jackson Mthembu swallowed the stratcom propaganda of the Sunday Times about the Maharani Hotel meeting "hook-line-and-sinker". In fact this is one of the milder comments that I have made on social media, about how comrade Mthembu (either because of political prejudice or naïveté, or both) allowed himself to be led by the nose by what the Sunday Times published. Again, my views about this are no secret. I have actually told this to comrade Mthembu to his face.

Years ago, when I was National Spokesperson of the ANC, I recruited comrade Mthembu to his first position as spokesperson for the ANC in the province of Mpumalanga, and trained him. When he so pathetically blundered into uncritically accepting the rubbish that the Sunday Times published, I said I have evidently failed to train him properly. I have certainly expected a greater ability for discernment from comrade Mthembu, and he disappointed me.

As such, we would like to ask you the following:

1. Do you consider this a fair characterization of the Twitter Storm group's activities? If not, how would you describe the group?

No, your description of the activities of the group is disingenuous, in that you are trying to create controversy where there is none. The 'Twitter Storm' WhatsApp group certainly does not have as its goal, "fighting a factional battle within the ANC" (to quote your prejudiced and emotive description). It is a small group of only 21 participants with diverse political homes (not everyone in the group are members of the ANC). So for example, the initiator of the group, Mr. Adil Nchabeleng, in the last national elections campaigned for the African People's Convention (APC).

A fair and correct description of the activities of the group would be a small, diverse, group of participants, who endeavor to promote our ideological convictions - to the extent that they overlap - which in a broad sense are pro-poor, and a commitment to the full economic liberation, and empowerment, of the majority of black (especially African) South Africans. As such we share a common commitment to support, and promote, Radical Economic Transformation (RET).

There is absolutely nothing untoward for us as politically conscious persons, with strong political views, to do so. This is indeed very different from journalists, like yourselves, who coordinate your reporting in discussion groups, and echo-chambers, to decide on a particular angle for the propaganda stories that you write. You literally plot together about how to use your various news platforms to repeat, amplify, and perpetuate such propaganda for your particular political objectives. It certainly did not go unnoticed that there were journalists who were active members of the 'Save South Africa' campaign.

My commitment to Radical Economic Transformation (RET), as the official economic policy program of the African National Congress (as formally articulated in the pro-RET Resolutions of the 54th National Conference of the ANC), is certainly no secret. I work for, and openly promote, the implementation of RET when and wherever I get

the opportunity, not only in the small 'Twitter Storm' WhatsApp group, but also in many other (some of them far larger) groups. Lol, now that I have told you this, you will probably also try to infiltrate those WhatsApp groups with moles in order to 'spy' on what is happening there 😂. May I advise you not to go through all the trouble. Just simply ask, I (and the other members of those groups) do so openly and unapologetically. In fact, I would like to see many more WhatsApp groups, and other forums/platforms, to be established to work for, and to promote, the implementation of Radical Economic Transformation. I am on record to have called on everyone who is committed to Radical Economic Transformation to organize, and actively promote this official policy program of the ANC in whatever way they possibly can. I repeat that call also in this reply to you, and I hope that you will report that I do so.

This is my democratic right as a citizen, as well as a member of the ANC, who takes the Resolutions of the National Conferences of the ANC very seriously. This well-known commitment of mine is certainly not factional, it is mainstream ANC, giving expression to the ANC's 108 year long history of struggling for the full liberation of the oppressed black majority of South Africans, which certainly also must include economic liberation.

I remind you of the commitment to RET that President Cyril Ramaphosa expressed in two recent speeches to our nation, while addressing the challenges that we are faced with regarding the coronavirus pandemic, and the resultant lockdown.

I do not know if all the members of the group are sympathetic to President Jacob Zuma, in as much as support, or lack thereof, for President Zuma is not a prominent part of the discussions/exchanges in the group.

2. Do you dispute that you participated in the group's organised social media campaigns ("Twitter storms")?

I acknowledge that I am a member of the group. However, since you evidently have a 'mole'/spy (eish, how pathetic can one get?) in the group, that passes on the content of the group discussions to you, you will have noticed that my participation in the group is sporadic, and I can certainly not be described as participating "in the group's organized social media campaigns" (again a deliberate emotive phrase by you, trying to make the perfectly above board discussions in the group seem sinister). Nor, do I think the participation of the other members in the group's discussions can be described, by any fanciful flight of your imagination, as such.

The group, like any other, seeks to share ideas, and discussions about issues of common interests - it does not run campaigns. Surely, your 'mole' in the group would have told you that? Or did you simply decide to ignore it in your pathetic attempt to force a story out something that does not exist? What a sorry excuse for journalists you are. This is nothing else but hack journalism.

3. Are you still a member of the Twitter Storm WhatsApp group?

Yes, I am still a member of the group, albeit a rather inactive one. As I have indicated above, my participation in the group is sporadic. I see no reason to leave the group, and intend to remain a member.

4. Would you have any objection to being described as an ally of former President Zuma?

No, why would I have any objection to be known as a supporter of President Zuma? My aversion to the politically motivated persecution of President Zuma is well known, and a matter of public record. I support President Zuma as my comrade, a loyal member of the ANC, and former member of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), of whom President Zuma was one of our most illustrious Commanders. As I have stated numerous times: "One soldier does not leave another soldier behind on the battlefield".

May I also remind you that the Secretary General of the ANC, comrade Ace Magashule, stated unequivocally that it is the right of any member of the ANC to support President Zuma. In my support for President Zuma I am certainly not alone within the ANC, as the large numbers of supporters that gather at every court appearance of President Zuma indicate, the vast majority of whom are ANC members.

I would be grateful if you could come back to us by the end of the weekend (Sunday 17 May 2020). If you would prefer to discuss this over the phone, you are welcome to contact me on 074 713 5558.

Kind regards,
Susan Comrie
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