

The New Copyright Trolls: How a Twitter Network Used Copyright Complaints to Harass Tanzanian Activists

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1 Introduction

On December 2, 2021, Twitter announced that they had suspended a network of 268 accounts that were supportive of the Tanzanian government and had used copyright reporting adversarially to target accounts belonging to Tanzanian activists. According to Twitter, many of the African personas used in this campaign were previously Russian personas, suggesting the operation may have been partially outsourced to a Russian-speaking country. The adversarial reporting in Tanzania was observed by [Access Now in October 2020](#) and reported by the [BBC in December 2020](#). Coordinated adversarial account reporting is not unique to Twitter; in August 2020 [Facebook suspended](#) a network of accounts in Pakistan with Facebook Pages and private Groups that coordinated the reporting of Facebook accounts critical of Islam and the Pakistani government and that leveraged a Chrome extension to report accounts in bulk.

This Tanzanian operation worked by first taking text or images tweeted by accounts that criticized the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party, then putting the same content on WordPress sites and modifying the date to make it appear as if the WordPress post preceded the tweet. Fake accounts pretending to be Tanzanians or South Africans then reported the content to Twitter for violations of the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA). Twitter then notified the accounts of the accusations. To counter such accusations, however, the accused [must share their personal information](#). At least one of the targeted accounts relied on anonymity for safety, making it difficult to formally counter the attacks. This operation succeeded in getting Twitter to suspend at least two of the targeted accounts, though both have since been reinstated.

Parts of the network served more simply to send harassing tweets to Tanzanian activists, the political opposition, and foreign media. These tweets often read as if they were written by a child, saying, for example, “you have an empty head,” or were simply a nonsensical series of letters and numbers.

2 Political Context

Though Tanzania has regular multiparty elections, the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party has held power for decades. In October 2020 the CCM’s John Pombe Magufuli won a second term as president. While his first term in power included the completion of landmark infrastructure projects such as the Kigamboni Bridge, Dar es Salaam Bus Rapid Transit, and improvements to the Julius Nyerere International Airport, he also restricted civil and political freedoms. He temporarily [banned newspapers](#) that ran unfavorable coverage of his regime, [stopped the livestreaming of parliamentary sessions](#), signed legislation [restricting civil society](#), and [supported prohibiting pregnant girls](#) from going to school.

Magufuli’s challenger in the October 2020 elections was [Tundu Lissu](#), an outspoken critic of Magufuli. Lissu has been the target of what many believe was [government harassment](#). After surviving a 2017 assassination attempt while a member of Parliament, Lissu spent several years living in exile. He [returned](#)

to Tanzania in July of 2020 to contest the general election. Before returning to Tanzania, Lissu retained the law services of Robert Amsterdam in advance of anticipated harassment and legal challenges to his candidacy. The law firm of Robert Amsterdam is known for also representing other opposition presidential candidates in East Africa, such as Bobby Wine in Uganda, and other Tanzanian opposition politicians.

Magufuli died in March 2021 and was succeeded by Vice President Samia Suluhu Hassan.

3 Network Overview

The publicized portion of the suspended network includes 268 accounts. Tweets received just 0.4 interactions (likes + retweets + quote tweets + replies) on average, and much of this engagement appears to have come from accounts within the suspended network itself. The tweet with the highest engagement received just 87 interactions. The average account had nine followers; 166 accounts had no followers. Most of the accounts were created in the second half of 2020, and most of the visible tweet activity was around the October 2020 elections (see Figure 1). Tweets were in a mix of English and Swahili.

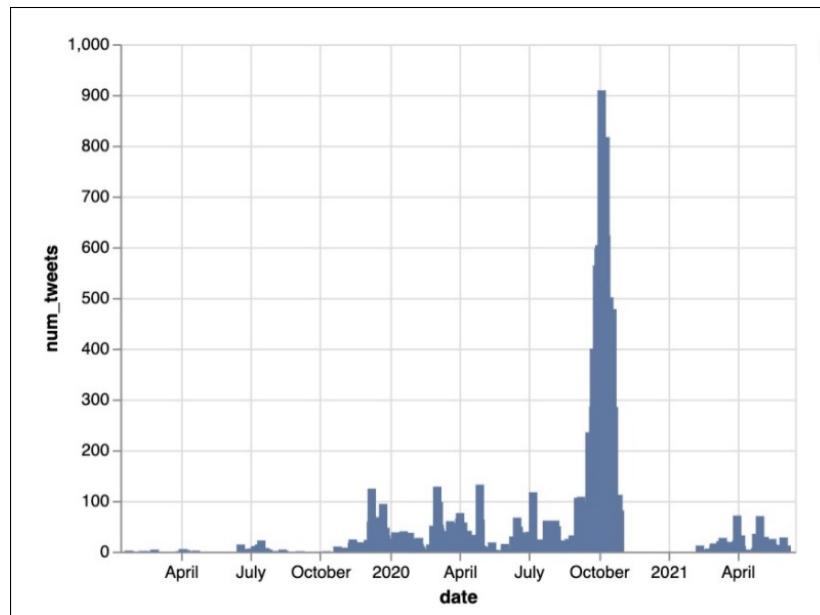


Figure 1: Tweet frequency over time.

The most frequently used hashtags, shown in Table 1 on the next page, were generally supportive of Magufuli's reelection campaign.

While the overwhelming majority of suspended accounts do not appear to have been real people, we believe one of the accounts, with a little over 1,000 followers, was a real person. This individual identified as an aspiring politician; a photo on his Facebook profile showed him shaking hands with a CCM politician, and he

Hashtag	Frequency
ChaguaMagufuli2020	7,598
Magufuli	4,335
T2020JPM	3,647
KuraKwaMagufuli	3,079
MaguTena2020	1,566
MagufuliRais2020	1,156
Vote4Magufuli	954
ChaguaMagufuli	825
MitanoYaUshindi	731
TanzaniaElectionFacts	674

Table 1: The network's most frequently used hashtags. JPM stands for John Pombe Magufui.

followed many CCM Facebook Pages. This account's tweets resembled the crude harassment tweets from the broader network.

4 Adversarial Copyright Reporting: How the Scheme Worked

While the tweets from the suspended accounts do not provide insight into the dynamics of the copyright reporting, many of the targeted accounts did their own investigations into their harassment, and from their tweets we can gain insight into how the operation worked.

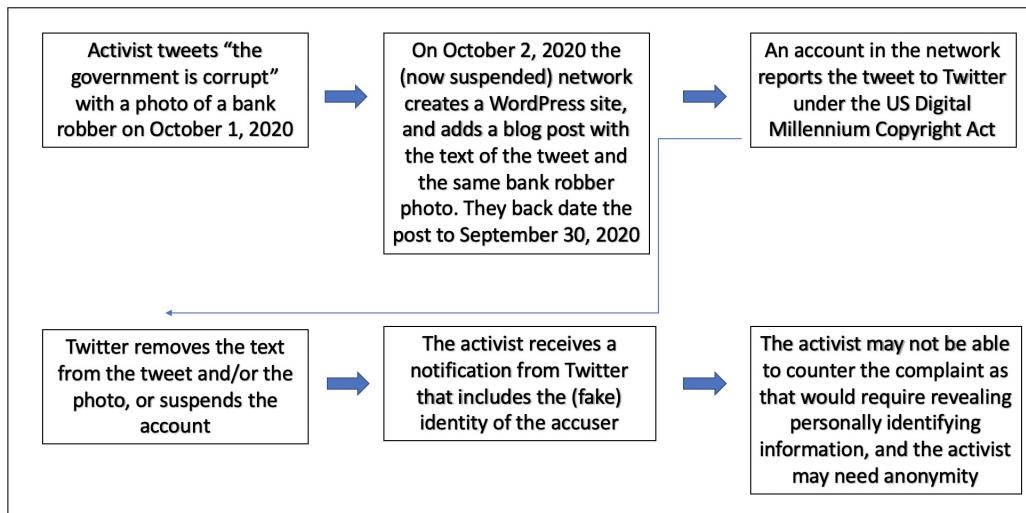


Figure 2: How the copyright reporting scheme worked, with a hypothetical example.

The typical starting point in this operation was a tweet—sometimes just text, sometimes with an image—from a targeted account, which included the prominent activist known as Kigogo (@kigogo2014 on Twitter, 640,000 followers). Kigogo is affiliated with human rights organization Fichua Tanzania, which advocates for a politically free and open Tanzania. @kigogo2014 is a pseudonymous account that shares **inside information on the country's elites** and is on occasion critical of the government, which has threatened to **unveil and arrest** the individual behind the account. Also targeted in this scheme was @RealHauleGluck (237,000 followers), who self-describes as a human rights watcher in Tanzania.

The network then created websites—we know of three of them based on a tweet from @kigogo2014 (see Figures 3 and 4). These sites were undeveloped and existed exclusively to post content copied from the targeted Twitter accounts. Each post on the websites was typically just an image or some of the words from the original tweet.

Kigogo @kigogo2014 - Oct 11, 2020
@TwitterSupport @Twitter iam writing to you to bring to your attention the following FAKE and NON EXISTING companies in Tanzania run by Tanzania Intelligence services(TISS) in reporting bogus copyright claims to specific twitter accounts in Tanzania which are criticizing the govt

34 100 609

Kigogo @kigogo2014

1. AfricatopNews base in Dar Es Salaam
👉 Africatopnews.blogspot.com
2. Covid Tanzania based in Dodoma
👉 covidtanzania.wordpress.com
3. NewsTzOlivia based in Dodoma
👉 newstzolivia.wordpress.com

These bogus companies have submitted a litany of dubious copyright claims under DMCA as a

7:17 AM · Oct 11, 2020 · Twitter for iPad

61 Retweets 1 Quote Tweet 390 Likes

Figure 3: @kigogo2014 identified three of the websites used to post the content from tweets, which were then used to support the copyright complaints.

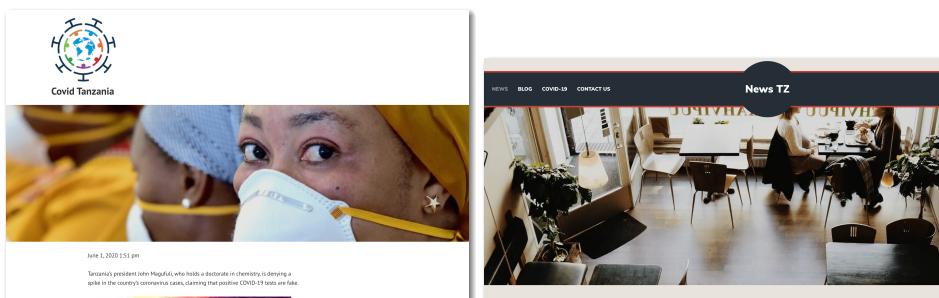


Figure 4: Two of the websites used in the copyright complaint scheme. Left: <https://covidtanzania.wordpress.com/>, archived here. Right: <https://newstzolivia.wordpress.com/>, archived here.

These websites then backdated a blog post to make it appear as if it had been created prior to the date of the original tweet. For example, Figure 5 shows source code from one of the WordPress sites. The post shows the publication date of September 27, 2020, making it appear as if it had been published several days before the original content was tweeted on October 1, 2020—but the source code shows the post was actually edited on October 2, 2020. Note that the minute fields for the published and updated dates are within two minutes of each other (19 and 21, respectively), further suggesting that the blog post was created on October 2nd at 3:19pm, manually backdated to September 27th (but preserving the time field at 3:19pm), then completed on October 2nd at 3:21pm.

```
>> <p>hivi nyie mnamuogopa Lissu kumpeleka barua kama wenzenu. Yaani barua yenu mmemukidika Mbowe wale wenzenu wamepeleka kwa Mnyikal Eti nyie chana ? Mna shida gani kwani?</p>
<meta>
    <span class="byline">


```

Figure 5: An excerpt of source code from newstzolivia.wordpress.com/blog-2, showing that a post dated September 27, 2020, on the blog was actually edited on October 2, 2020, one day after the language was tweeted by @kigogo2014.

In the next step of the scheme, Twitter accounts in the network filed DMCA complaints on Twitter. From screenshots the targeted accounts posted (see Figure 6 on the following page), we can see what these complaints looked like. They include a name—likely fake, and often appear to be Nigerian. The phone number does not appear to map onto the format of real phone numbers in Tanzania, where cell phone numbers begin with +2557 or +2556 and landline numbers begin with 02. Additionally, the same phone number was used for complaints linked to multiple individuals. The complaints linked to the allegedly violative content, along with the “original” content. In one somewhat comical example, the complaint was over a generic photo of a sunset (Figure 7 on page 8).

The newstzolivia.wordpress.com site had a post that consisted entirely of likely backdated tweet-length content, often stolen from @kigogo2014; examples are shown in Figure 8 on page 9. The site listed the email patelolivia719@gmail.com under one post, and one of the suspended accounts used the display name Olivia Patel. The account, created on June 16, 2020, had no followers.

The complaints also included the address of the complainant. Interestingly, 99 of the suspended Twitter accounts included an address in their bio, primarily in South Africa. We suspect the network thought their complaints would seem more credible if the address listed in the complaint matched the address listed in the bio, though it is unclear if this mattered. Many of the accounts that listed addresses had no visible tweets, suggesting their primary purpose may have been copyright reporting.

The network succeeded in getting both @kigogo2014 and @RealHauleGluck temporarily suspended. **Many Twitter accounts** tried to call Twitter’s attention to this problem. The network also succeeded in getting text and media from these accounts’ tweets removed. In many (if not all) instances, this content has not been reinstated.

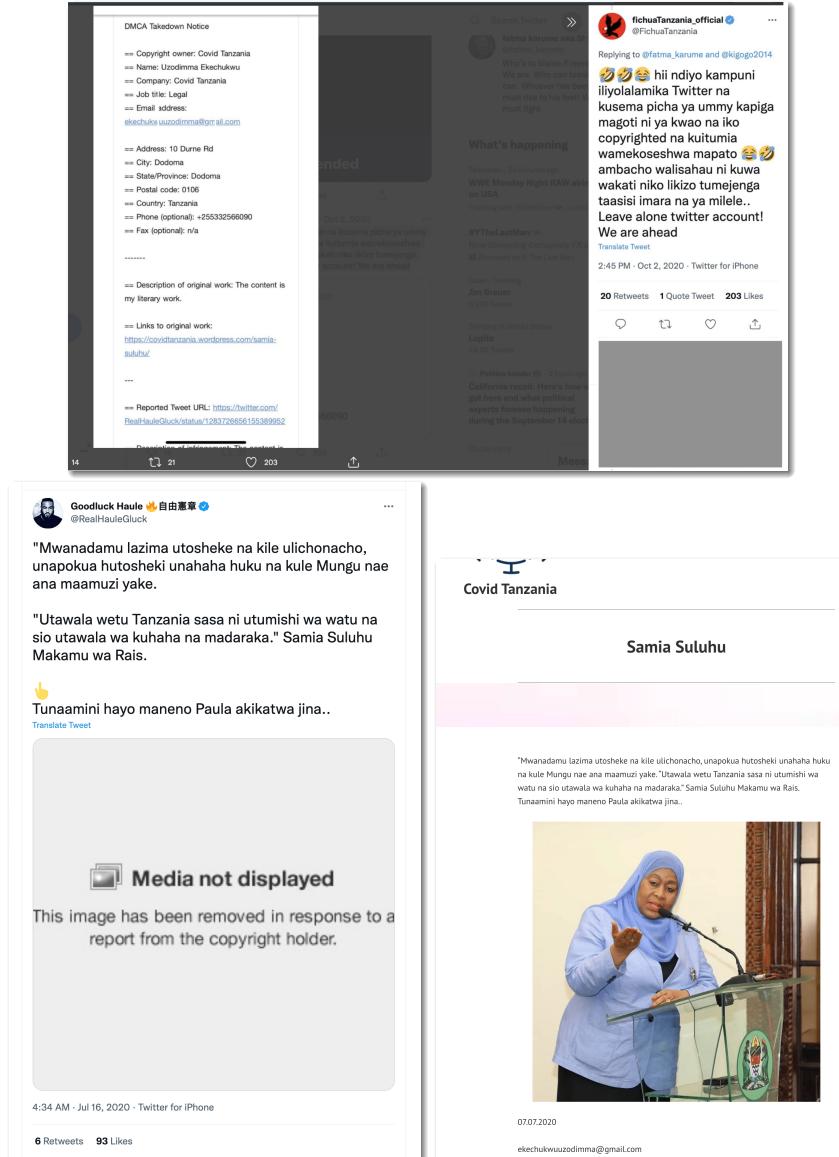


Figure 6: Top: A tweet from @fichuaTanzania, an account linked to @kigogo2014. The tweet shows a DMCA complaint likely received by @RealHauleGluck. The tweet says “This is the company that’s complaining in Twitter and saying that the picture of Ummy kneeling is theirs and is copyrighted and by me using it, they’ve lost out on income. What they have forgotten is that while I was on vacation, we built a strong institution that will last forever. Leave alone twitter account! We are ahead.” Bottom left: The tweet reported in the above DMCA complaint, dated July 16, 2020. An archived version of the tweet, seen here, shows that the photo is the same as the photo in the bottom right. This tweet says “As a human being, you must be satisfied with what you have, when you’re unsatisfied you struggle here and there. God too has his decisions. The leadership in Tanzania is in service of the people and isn’t a leadership that struggles for power.” — Samia Suluhu, Vice President We believe these words as Paula is being disqualified.’ Bottom right: The supposed original work that the reported tweet allegedly stole, on a WordPress site dated July 7, 2020. The source code for the post shows that it was modified on July 17, 2020, suggesting the image was inserted after the tweet, not before.

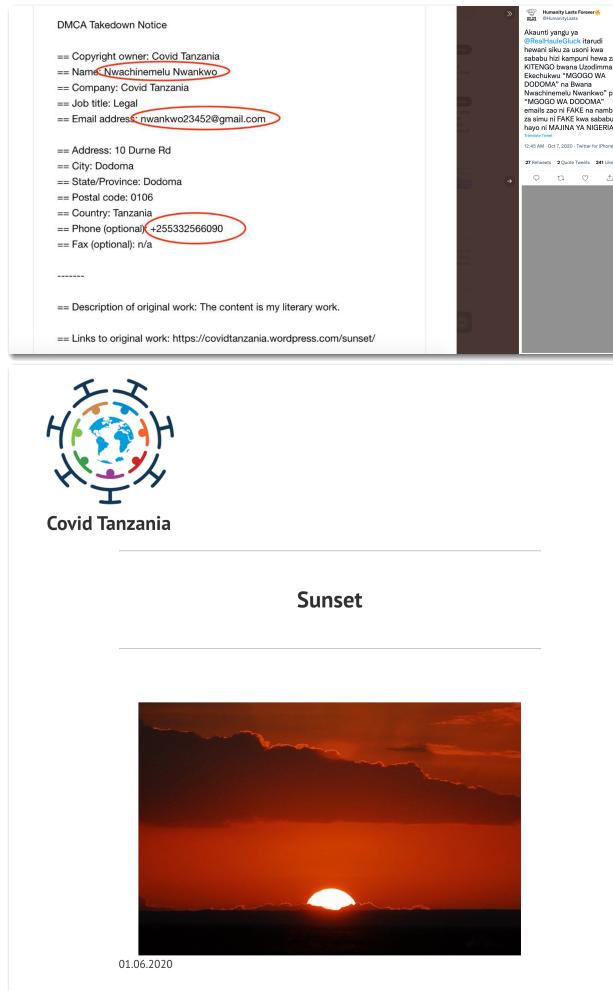


Figure 7: Top: A [DMCA complaint](#). The phone number listed here is the same as the one in the complaint in Figure 6 on the previous page. Bottom: The supposed [original image](#).

5 Tweets Harassing Activists, the Political Opposition, and the Media

Though the tactically novel aspect of this dataset comes from the copyright reporting, the network also engaged in unsophisticated harassment. Suspended accounts targeted @kigogo and @RealHauleGluck along with other activists, the political opposition, and media outlets (e.g., BBC Swahili) with harassing tweets. Accounts often used the same text, over and over again.

Tweets targeting the BBC accused it of spreading propaganda. One tweet directed at the BBC said “@bbcs wahili MAPIGANO GANI KWA NINI MNAZUSHA TAFRANI KWA TANZANIA KAMA MNALIPWA HUKO KUTUCHSFUA BASI FUNGENI VOMBO VYENU” (“@bbcs wahili what fights why do you make up conflicts in Tanzania if you’re getting paid by others to slander us then close your press”).

The figure consists of five screenshots arranged in a grid-like layout:

- Top Left:** A screenshot from the newstzolivia.wordpress.com blog. It shows a text snippet about a political figure's speech at a fuel procurement agency. Below the snippet is a photograph of two men, one speaking into a microphone.
- Top Right:** A screenshot of a tweet from [@kigogo2014](https://twitter.com/kigogo2014). The tweet contains a similar text snippet and includes a link to the blog post. The image placeholder for the photo is labeled "Media not displayed".
- Middle:** A screenshot of another tweet from [@kigogo2014". This tweet also contains the same text snippet and image, with a note indicating it has been withheld due to copyright concerns.](https://twitter.com/kigogo2014)
- Bottom Left:** An archived version of the tweet from [@kigogo2014". The text and image are identical to the ones above.](https://twitter.com/kigogo2014)
- Bottom Right:** A screenshot of a tweet from [@tapol">@tapol" that maps onto the last text snippet on the blog. The image placeholder is labeled "Media not displayed".](https://twitter.com)

Figure 8: Top left: A screenshot from the newstzolivia.wordpress.com blog. Top right: An original tweet that maps onto the second text snippet on the blog. Middle: This was originally a [@kigogo2014](https://twitter.com/kigogo2014) tweet that mapped onto the third text snippet on the blog. Searching phrases from that text snippet pulls up this tweet on TweetDeck, even though the text is not currently available on Twitter, or on TweetDeck. Bottom left: An archived version of the tweet shows that the text matches. Bottom right: A tweet that shares language with the last text snippet on the blog.

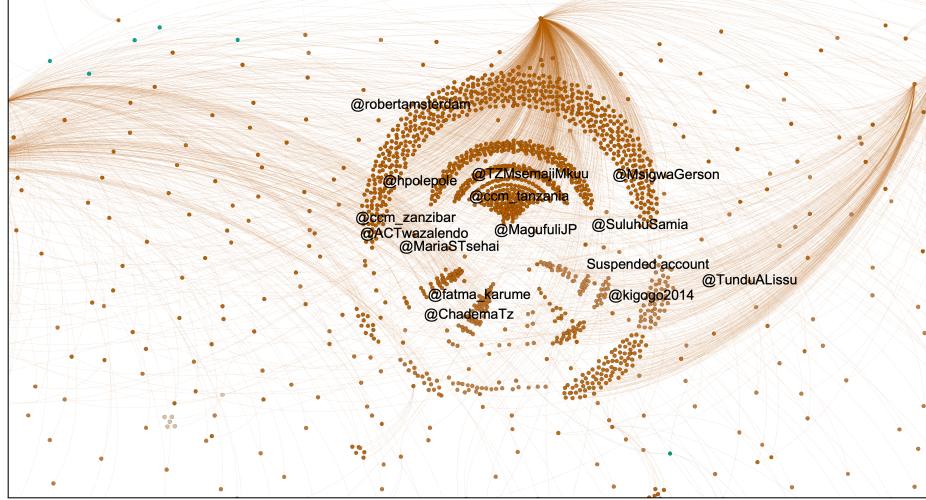


Figure 9: Labeled nodes are the most-mentioned accounts in the network. Lines indicate connections between the account that did the tweeting and the account that was mentioned. The most-mentioned nodes include the targeted activists and ruling party politicians.

Harassment tweets targeting activists took different forms. Some tweets contained pro-CCM content. Other tweets directly attacked the activists themselves. Many tweets directed at Kigogo tried to counter specific claims about government failings; one tweet on September 29, 2020, said, “@kigogo2014 huduma za afya zimeboreshwa na sasa kila hospitali kuna dirisha maalumu la wazee” (“@kigogo2014 health services have been improved and now every hospital has a special window for the elderly”).

Many tweets called activists “mpumbavu” (idiot) and “mbwaaa” (dog). Several tweets targeted @MariaSTsehai, a sometime CCM critic. One tweet on November 21, 2019, said simply, in English, “@tzdyetu @MariaSTsehai You have an empty head.”

Other tweets replied to the targeted account with gibberish text (see Figure 10 on the next page), likely to annoy and distract them. Many tweets had an abundance of spelling errors.

Individuals and organizations associated with Tanzania’s opposition did not escape targeting by this Twitter network. Frequent mentions and tagged accounts include the Twitter account for Tundu Lissu, the opposition candidate who challenged Magufuli in the 2020 Tanzanian general election, and references to CHADEMA, an opposition political party. However, when compared to the Twitter network’s assault on activists and journalists, the accounts targeted opposition individuals and groups less frequently. Moreover, when they did reference opposition candidates, they often did so only in the text of the tweet rather than tagging them; instead, they tagged activists. The tweets often sounded like kindergarten-level insults. For example, one tweet on September 25, 2020, said: “@kigogo2014 chadema ni chama chama cha hovyo sana yaaani chama cha kipuuzi” (translation: @kigogo2014 CHADEMA is a very subpar party I mean a stupid party).

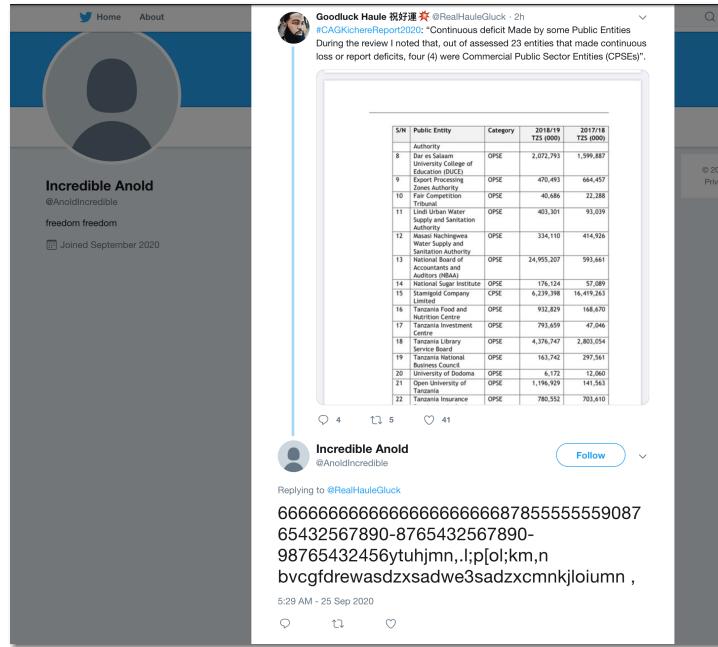


Figure 10: A **gibberish reply** from a suspended account at @RealHauleGluck.

The suspended network also targeted foreign individuals and actors who are (or have been) associated with Tanzanian politics. Two foreign Twitter accounts were targeted frequently: the Twitter account of the US embassy in Tanzania, and the Twitter account of Robert Amsterdam, an international lawyer who represented Tundu Lissu. Tweets targeting both Robert Amsterdam and the US Embassy took issue with perceived foreign interference in Tanzanian politics in ways that are antithetical to the perceived local culture, emphasizing, for example, that foreign actors do not understand Tanzanian culture. A tweet directed at the US Embassy included “@USAmbTanzania You have election in you country but you have never heard Tanzanians talk about that or intervene or direct you [in] what to do, we as tanzania under our beloved president”; another tweet directed at Robert Amsterdam included “@robertamsterdam stop misleading the people in tanzania it will remain peaceful we cannot listen to you like you.” The network also accused targeted accounts of engaging in new forms of colonialism (“Neocolonialism and their puppets”), particularly as it relates to rights for the LGBTQ+ community.

6 Conclusion

The announcement by Twitter on December 2, 2021 to suspend the network of accounts involved in spurious DCMA claims highlights another attempt by government-aligned individuals to silence opposition voices. It's a tactic that has been documented elsewhere in the world, including Nicaragua and Ecuador. The operation succeeded in getting content by popular opposition figures removed from Twitter, showing the tactic had some effectiveness. Twitter has been an organizing space for anti-government activists and opinion for Tanzania, and 268 accounts—166 with no followers—were able to covertly censor major voices in the country.

While the operation features some coordination, the barriers to it happening elsewhere in the world are low. It didn't take a high degree of specialist skill, but the creation of free websites, and numerous accounts where it didn't matter how many followers they had. We found that at least three WordPress websites had been created in order to falsify evidence in support of the copyright claims, and that some of the accounts appeared to be trying to add legitimacy by locating themselves in countries other than Tanzania. The network further featured numerous examples of crude harassment of opposition accounts and activists, and amplification of pro-government voices. However, given the small reach of the accounts, this messaging didn't spread far. The challenge in identifying this tactic is that false DCMA claims don't rely on mass reach on Twitter. It's more or less a covert operation, and relies on Twitter or those affected to reveal the operation. It's also a challenge for social media platforms like Twitter to effectively and accurately apply copyright claims in a way that doesn't infringe on public discourse.



The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Stanford Internet Observatory was founded in 2019 to research the misuse of the internet to cause harm, formulate technical and policy responses, and teach the next generation how to avoid the mistakes of the past.



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