Mind Farce: An Investigation into an Inauthentic Facebook and Instagram Network Linked to an Israeli Public Relations Firm

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1 Introduction

On August 4, 2022, Meta announced the removal of a network of Facebook and Instagram accounts that posted about Palestinian, Angolan, and Nigerian politics. This report groups findings by these three topical clusters, but we note that Meta found links between the entire network and one entity: Mind Force, an Israeli public relations firm, and there is no evidence that these were distinct operational clusters. The network included 42 Pages, nine groups, 259 profiles, and 107 Instagram accounts. Meta suspended the network not due to the content of the posts, but rather for coordinated inauthentic behavior. Meta shared a portion of this network's activity with the Stanford Internet Observatory on June 13, 2022.

Key takeaways:

- The Palestinian cluster of accounts criticized the Hamas government for corruption and damaging Gaza's economy. It also pushed the claim that Iran was the last remaining ally of the Palestinians.

- The Angolan cluster of accounts promoted Angola's culture and economic prospects to the English-speaking world, praised the ruling MPLA party and criticized the right-wing opposition party, UNITA. Some of the content produced by this cluster was plagiarized from established Angolan news outlets.

- The Nigerian cluster of accounts existed to support the candidacy of presidential aspirant Kingsley Moghalu, who has since withdrawn from the race.

- A LinkedIn account for an individual who says he is a Mind Force employee noted that he was a "Campaign Manager to Angolan Government" (Figure 1 on the following page). While it is increasingly common for governments to outsource their disinformation campaigns to digital marketing firms, this type of link is rarely so explicitly visible.

- Both the Nigerian and Angolan clusters had similar evidence of inauthentic followers and engagement. Both clusters, for example, had Pages with large follower counts relative to their creation date and volume of post interactions, along with engagement from accounts that appeared to be fake. Meta says that the "operation appeared to have leveraged fake engagement services to buy likes."

- A low-follower but novel set of accounts within the Palestinian cluster linked out to a Google Form mean to elicit anonymous confessions from Gaza residents, which were then shared on the accounts. By the time Meta suspended this network, the only supposed confessions posted were apolitical. It seems possible, however, that the ultimate purpose was to elicit (or pretend to elicit) political complaints.

This is not the first time Meta has suspended a network attributed to an Israeli digital marketing firm. In 2019 they suspended a network linked to Archimedes

Group, which Times of Israel reporting suggested was linked to Grey Content Ltd., an Israeli advertising firm. Like the Mind Force network, the Archimedes network created content about Angola and Nigeria, though we have no evidence to suggest that the two firms have ties.
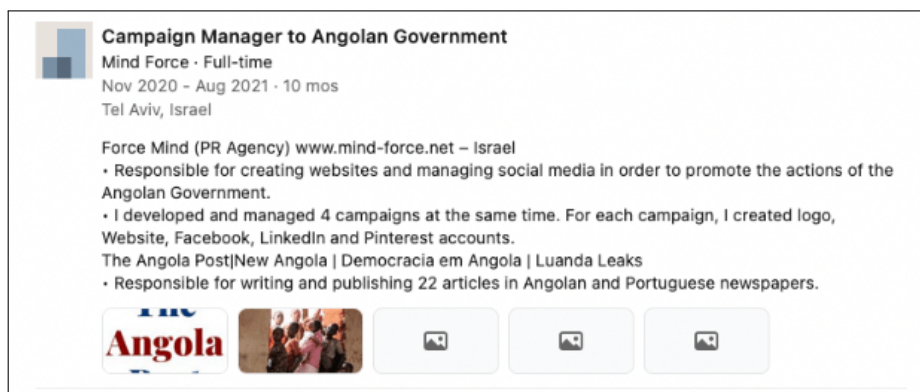

Figure 1: A Mind Force employee's LinkedIn profile. Remarkably, the employee explicitly states that his client is the government of Angola.
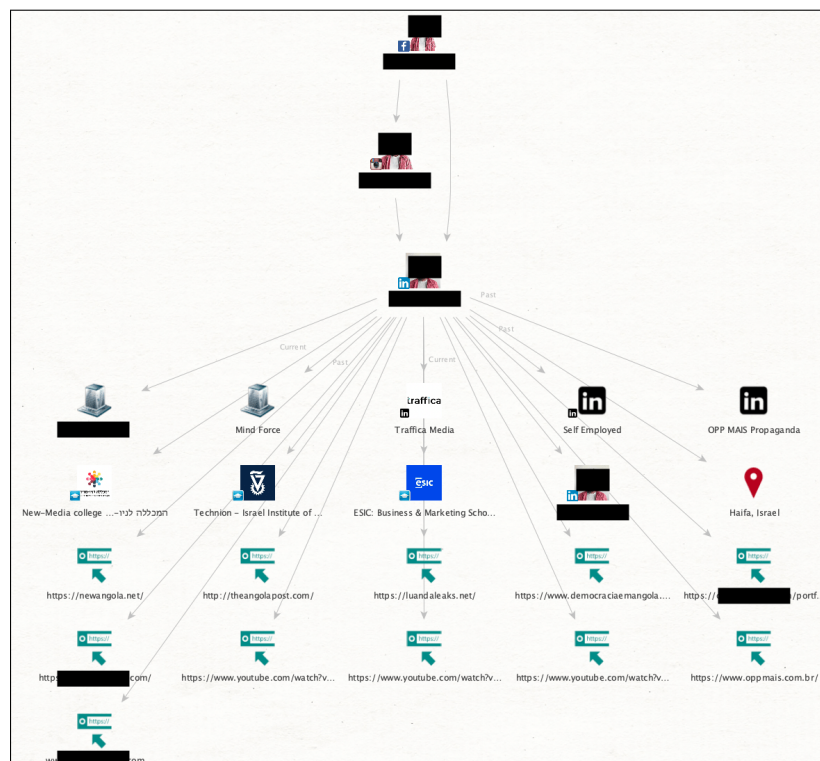

Figure 2: A graph leading from Facebook and Instagram profiles to the Mind Force employee's LinkedIn profile, where the employee takes credit for many of the sites in the network. Note that "propaganda" in Portuguese is typically used to mean "advertising". Graph generated with Maltego and Social Links.

2   The Digital Marketing Firm: Mind Force

Several of the suspended profiles were those of real individuals employed by Mind Force PR and Media, a company that, per its website, https://mind-force.net/, is "a Full-service communications agency specializing in public relations, Digital Marketing, Social Media, Content Marketing and more." The website presents the firm as an above board public relations firm, with the tag line "Build your dreams with us." Their site lists their first value as "Honesty," adding: "We are professional communicators who abide by a strict code of conduct by telling the truth in an ethical, forthright and compelling way on behalf of our clients." Domain registration from 2021 lists registration in Tel Aviv, and the website lists a contact address in Herzliya, in northern Tel Aviv, that is home to (among other things) a co-working space.

Figure 3: Left: The Mind Force logo. Right: Services Mind Force lists on their website.

The suspended profiles that listed their employer as Mind Force included two individuals who appear to originally be from Brazil and now live in Israel. The two individuals are partners for a separate business, a website design company. We suspect that these individuals were involved in the Portuguese-language content in the network.

3   Palestinian Cluster

Approximately 19 Pages, 66 profiles, six groups, and 42 Instagram accounts posted about Palestinian issues, the Middle East, and Islam. This was the largest portion of the broader takedown, and had been active since the end of 2020 until it was suspended in June 2022. The Pages presented themselves as either legitimate news Pages, cultural Pages, or satirical Pages. The network criticized the Hamas government and claimed that Iran was one of the last supporters of the

Palestinians. While some anti-Israel language was used occasionally, the network focused its criticism on the Hamas government.
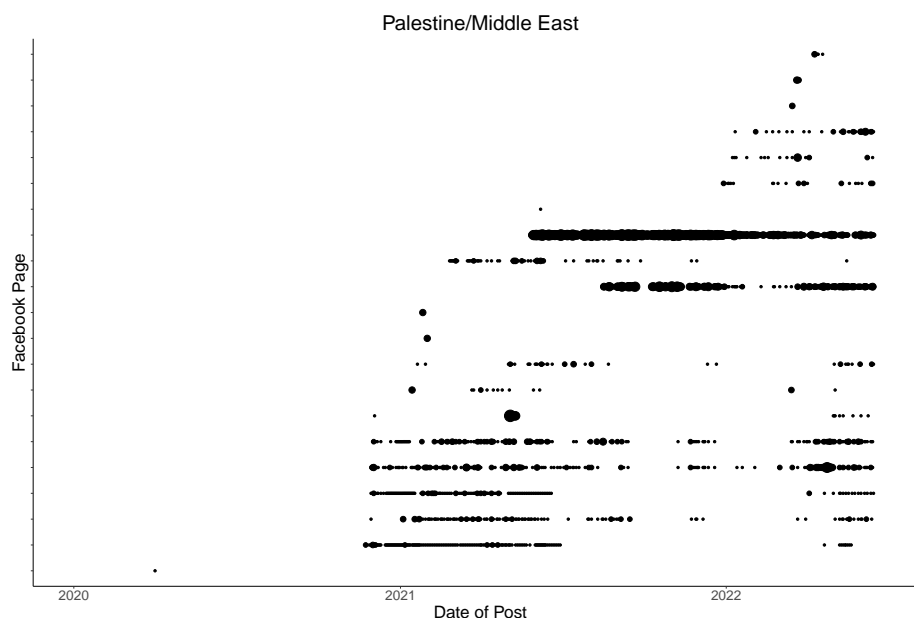

Figure 4: Posting frequency for Facebook Pages in the Palestinian cluster. Rows represent anonymized unique Pages. Figure created with data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Meta.

Anti-Hamas posts claimed the government was ineffective, had corrupt leaders, contributed to unemployment, and actively worked against the interests of civilians in Gaza. Posts highlighted topics like rising unemployment in Gaza, poor healthcare infrastructure, or excessive policing against civilians. One post from February 2022 linked to a news article discussing a Twitter campaign that used the phrase "They kidnapped Gaza" to protest Hamas' rule in Gaza. A post from June 2022 criticized Hamas for demolishing Palestinian homes for government projects. Two emblematic posts are shown in Figure 5 on the next page.

A second theme focused on Iran's relationship with Hamas. These posts highlighted Iran's support for a Palestinian state. Posts argued that other governments in the region have abandoned Palestinians, with Iran being their sole supporter. Many posts on Iran were from a Page called "The Culture of Persia," which is affiliated with the website https://cultureofpersia.com/.

Many posts used generally anti-Israel language, including #Israel_Occupation (in Arabic). A post from May 2022, for example, blamed the closure of the Erez crossing (a border crossing between Israel and the Gaza strip) on the Israeli occupation, and highlighted the economic costs of the closure to Gaza residents. Another post blamed Israeli attacks for Gaza's high unemployment. However the criticism of Israel in the network was dwarfed by the criticism of the Hamas government.

An unusual Page and Instagram account in the network were called Gaza

Figure 5: Left: A post from the "Headline News Network" Page says police are using excessive force in Gaza as economic and social conditions continue to deteriorate. The post claims police raided the businesses of street merchants. Right: A post from a Page called "The Hope Site" says "Unemployment in Gaza [...] his college major is engineering but his profession is a soap merchant on the streets."

Figure 6: Left: A post from "The Culture of Persia" Page. This post says Iran is the sole supporter of the Palestinian cause "at a time when Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE did not" extend their support. Right: A cartoon from a suspended Instagram account. The Supreme Leader of Iran is shown riding a donkey, which is meant to be Hamas.

Confession. The Page and Instagram account combined had just 10 followers, but their approach was novel. The Page description said "Confessions of the young men and women of Gaza / Tell us what is written in your heart" (translated from Arabic) and linked to a Google Form where people could share their supposed confessions, which were then shared anonymously on the social media accounts. At the time the accounts were suspended, they had only posted apolitical confessions. It seems possible, however, that the ultimate purpose was to elicit political complaints, or at least make it appear as if it was eliciting political complaints.

Figure 7: Left: The Google Form inviting residents of Gaza to share confessions. Right: A supposed romantic confession posted to the associated Facebook Page.

One additional cluster of accounts in the Palestinian network stood out: accounts for a supposed education platform called t3lem. The Facebook Page had almost 10,000 followers, though the associated Instagram accounts had very few followers. There is also a Twitter account (active as of July 15, 2022), Reddit account, Pinterest account, Tumblr account, and website https://t3lem.org/. This self-described education platform claimed to "provide free, high quality education to anyone, anywhere" and to offer scholarships (see Figure 9 on page 9). We were unable to find evidence that it did any of these things.

Many posts on the t3lem Facebook Page received thousands of interactions; the Page ran advertisements, which may have contributed to the popularity of some posts. The posts were consistent with broader narratives in the network, but focused on education. For example, posts criticized the Hamas government for failing to provide employment for university graduates and for not funding universities, and noted high drop-out rates in primary school. Our sense is that t3lem gained an audience by claiming to be an education platform, and then used its reach to fuel frustration with the Hamas government.

Figure 8: The Facebook Page for t3lem, which markets itself as "An education platform founded by people who believe that education is the future of the young generation and its goal is to provide free and high-quality education to anyone, anywhere."

The Palestinian cluster on Facebook and Instagram was linked to some additional low-follower accounts on Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube.

Figure 9: The https://t3lem.org/ website.

Figure 10: An advertisement that the t3lem Facebook Page ran. The boosted post notes that vert few graduates get jobs, and tells the story of a graduate who buried his master's degree certificate in the ground because it did not benefit him.

Figure 11: Two of the Twitter accounts linked to the suspended Facebook and Instagram network. Archived versions of the accounts are here, here, and here.

4 Angolan Cluster

The Angolan cluster spanned Facebook, Instagram and, in at least one case, LinkedIn.[1] It consisted of 122 Facebook profiles, 12 Facebook Pages, 2 Facebook Groups and 10 Instagram accounts, largely focusing on three narratives:

- Promoting Angola's culture and economic prospects to the English-speaking world, as well as its success in battling COVID-19.

- Positive portrayal of the ruling MPLA party and its officers, primarily the current President João Lourenço.

- Criticism of the right-wing opposition party, UNITA, and its current leader, Adalberto Costa Júnior.
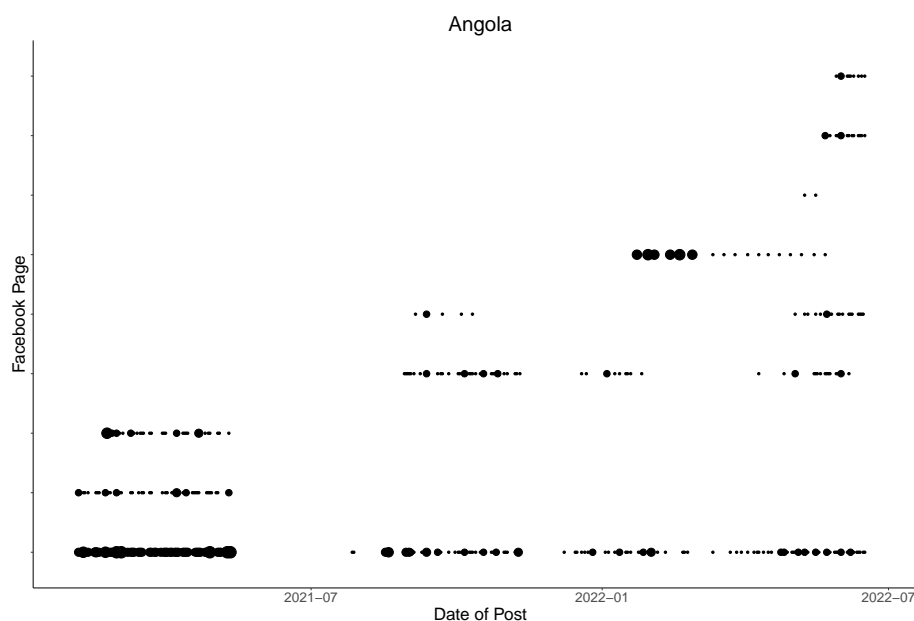
Figure 12: Posting frequency for Facebook Pages in the Angolan cluster. Rows represent anonymized unique Pages. Several pages appear to have been abandoned in February 2021, but their associated news outlets continued to publish. Figure created with data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Meta.

User engagement with pages and groups in the network was highly inconsistent: some groups showed moderate (albeit often inauthentic) engagement, some had almost no followers, and others—despite having tens of thousands of followers—had no engagement whatsoever. The latter discrepancy appears to appears to have been due to a culturally disparate paid follower network (see Section 4.1 on page 13 for more details on markers of inauthenticity). Some of these low-engagement accounts appear to have been largely abandoned (see Figure 12), but new articles continue to appear on their associated websites (for example, The Angola Post). Many of the articles posted appear to have been taken verbatim from other news outlets and scrubbed of bylines (see Figures 13 and 14).

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1. See, e.g., https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-angola-post/

Figure 13: Left: An original article from an established Angolan newspaper, Jornal de Angola. Right: a copy of the article posted on The Angola Post, one day later and without a byline.

Figure 14: Two posts with no user engagement from "The Angola Post", despite having 20,532 likers and 20,536 followers. Left: Vice President of the National Assembly Joana Lina at an event promoting the MPLA's agenda. Right: President Lourenço on Dia do Início da Luta Armada de Libertação Nacional ("Day of the Beginning of the Armed Struggle for National Liberation" calling for citizens to repudiate actions that "threaten national sovereignty". Both posts contain identical content to stories posted by other outlets.

Figure 15: Left: An article from "Fake News Angola" criticizing UNITA and its leader, Adalberto Costa Júnior. The text reads: *"Young people born after the 80s (or even a little before that, but not only) may not have the slightest idea, or don't even know what UNITA is. Since its foundation, UNITA has always been a tribalist organization that, to this day, has difficulties in being a truly inclusive party, it feeds its followers with false commitments and empty promises from its leaders. In terms of ascension in UNITA, it existed and continues to exist..."* Right: An article detailing a press conference from João Lourenço, promoting a unity government and explaining running for a second term.

Accounts on Facebook and Instagram promoted content related to the "Luanda Leaks",[2] a collection of documents[3] detailing the business dealings of Isabel dos Santos, the billionaire daughter of the former President of Angola, José Eduardo Dos Santos. The Luanda Leaks spurred investigation into Dos Santos' business dealings in both Angola and Portugal, and resulted in sanctions from both countries as well as from the US.

Given that President João Lourenço has campaigned on an anti-corruption platform[4] which has specifically targeted Isabel Dos Santos,[5] the promotion of content related to her and Luanda Leaks may be a way of playing up successes in battling corruption while portraying Angolan corruption as a relic of the previous administration. Luanda Leak-related pages received relatively low engagement and follower counts (see Figure 16 on the next page).

4.1 Inauthentic Behavior

Many of the users interacting with posts and accounts in the network display signals of inauthenticity: accounts sharing usernames in numeric sequence and reused profile images (see Figure 17 on the following page), and comments that

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2. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/20/what-are-the-luanda-leaks
3. https://www.icij.org/investigations/luanda-leaks/
4. https://www.ft.com/content/9ccc1df0-9f0d-11e9-9c06-a4640c9feebb
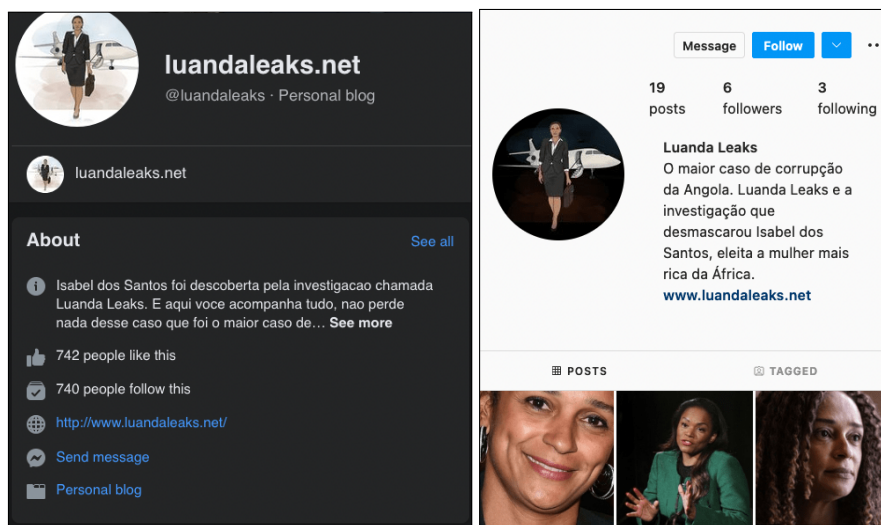5. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51221737

Figure 16: Facebook and Instagram pages promoting luandaleaks.net. Imagery is largely plagiarized from the original ICIJ investigative reports.

are either highly generic or non-specifically laudatory of Angola and its current government.
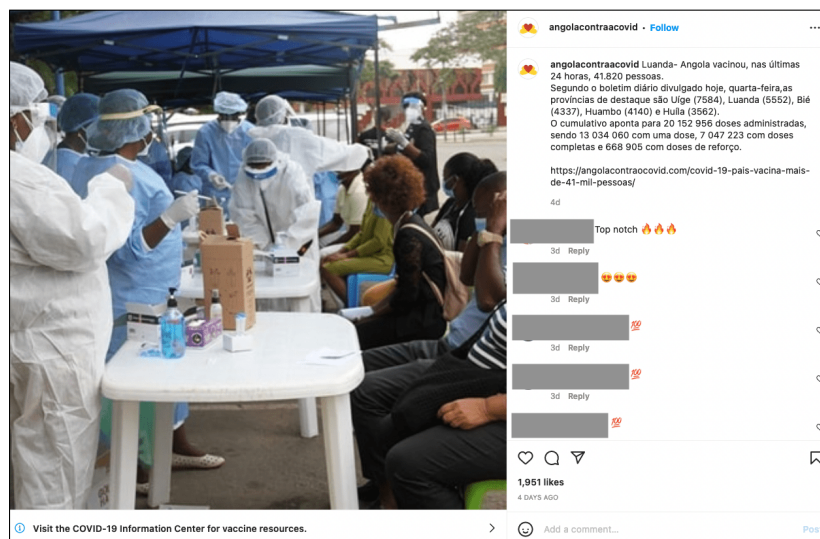

Figure 17: Commenters on a Facebook post from Angola Contra Covid touting Angola's vaccination program. As is typical with comments from the cluster, accounts comment with nothing of substance and two separate commenting accounts have a profile photo of the same individual.

Where comments were more than emoji reactions, they were near-universally pro-Angola and pro-MPLA (see Figure 18 on the next page). Accounts were frequently very recently created, often lacking profile photos entirely. Older posts often lacked any comments, perhaps due to the likely inauthentic accounts having been taken down by Facebook.

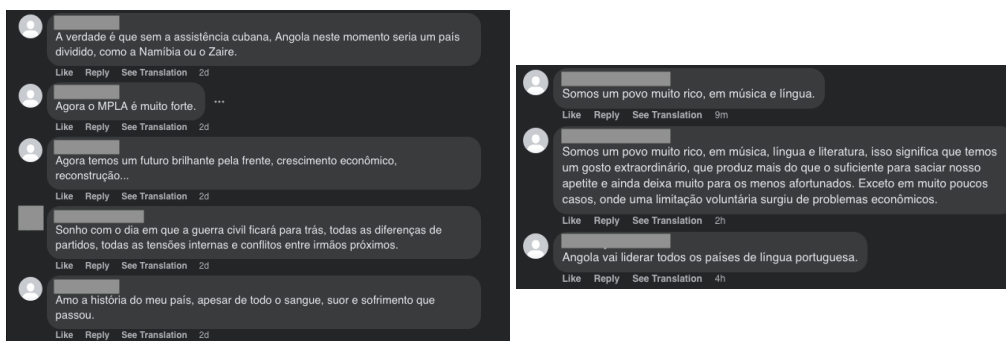Additionally, On Facebook, several sites—The Angola Post, Angola Tech, Angola

Figure 18: Assorted comments from new profiles largely lacking profile photos, lauding the ruling MPLA party, including partially duplicated comments saying how the "Angolan people are rich in music and language"

Para Todos, Democracia em Angola, Fake News Angola and Angola International— had anomalously large follower counts relative to their creation date and interactions on the posts themselves. We examined these dynamics and noted very large numbers of Vietnamese page followers and likers among them, as shown in Figure 19 and Figure 20 on the next page.
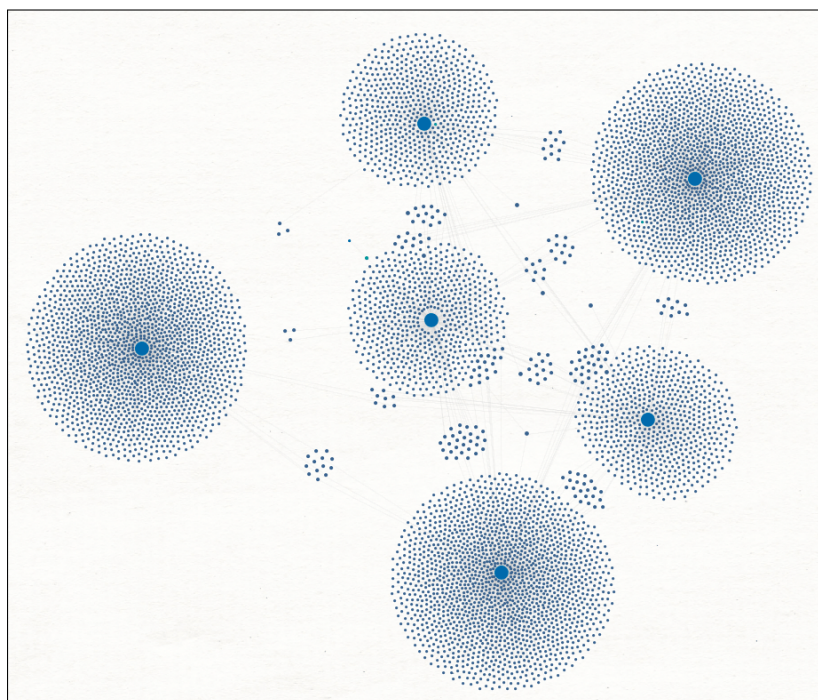

Figure 19: A large network of Vietnamese likers and followers of 6 of the Facebook pages. Graph generated with Maltego and Social Links.
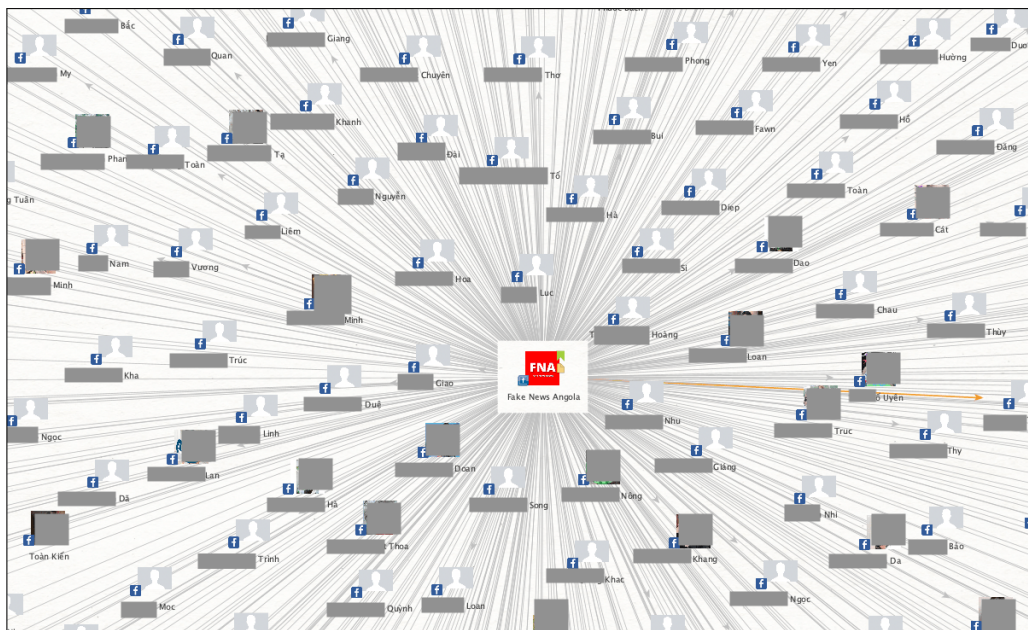
Figure 20: A zoom into the Page likers and followers of the "Fake News Angola" page. Graph generated with Maltego and Social Links.
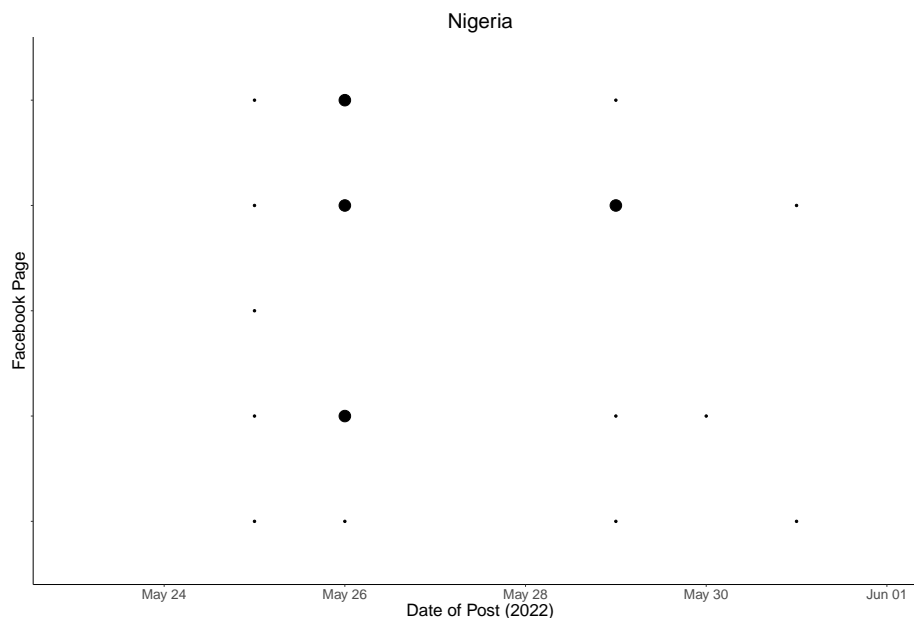
5   Nigerian Cluster

Figure 21: Posting frequency for Facebook Pages in the Nigerian cluster. Rows represent anonymized unique Pages. Figure created with data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Meta.

The Nigerian cluster, which included approximately 15 profiles, five Pages, and 20 Instagram accounts, existed exclusively to support the candidacy of presidential aspirant Kingsley Moghalu. Moghalu was deputy governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, and ran for president in 2019 with a platform outside the two major parties. The next presidential election is in February 2023. Moghalu was campaigning ahead of the next election on his social media accounts, which have hundreds of thousands of followers, although he withdrew his candidacy after failing to win the candidacy for the African Democratic Congress in June 2020.

This network first appeared in late May, 2022. Across Facebook and Instagram, accounts and Pages were created from then until early June. Four of these Pages were overtly pro-Moghalu, with names such as Moghalu4president and Moghalu_-supporters. Posts featured Moghalu's visions for Nigeria, videos of the politician speaking and a link to a supportive newspaper article.

Similarly to the Angolan cluster, four of the Nigeria Pages had an unusual Page follower to post engagement ratio, and had markers of inauthentic engagement. These Pages, which were created one month before they were suspended, had between 4,000 and 6,000 followers despite just a handful of posts, most of which had no engagement. Occasionally one post received a few dozens likes and comments. Many of the profiles that engaged with these posts had Portuguese names, which is not a language commonly spoken in Nigeria. As shown in Figure 23 on page 19, several comments were in Portuguese. It is possible the digital marketing company created fake Angolan profiles that were used for inauthentic engagement for both the Angola and Nigeria networks.
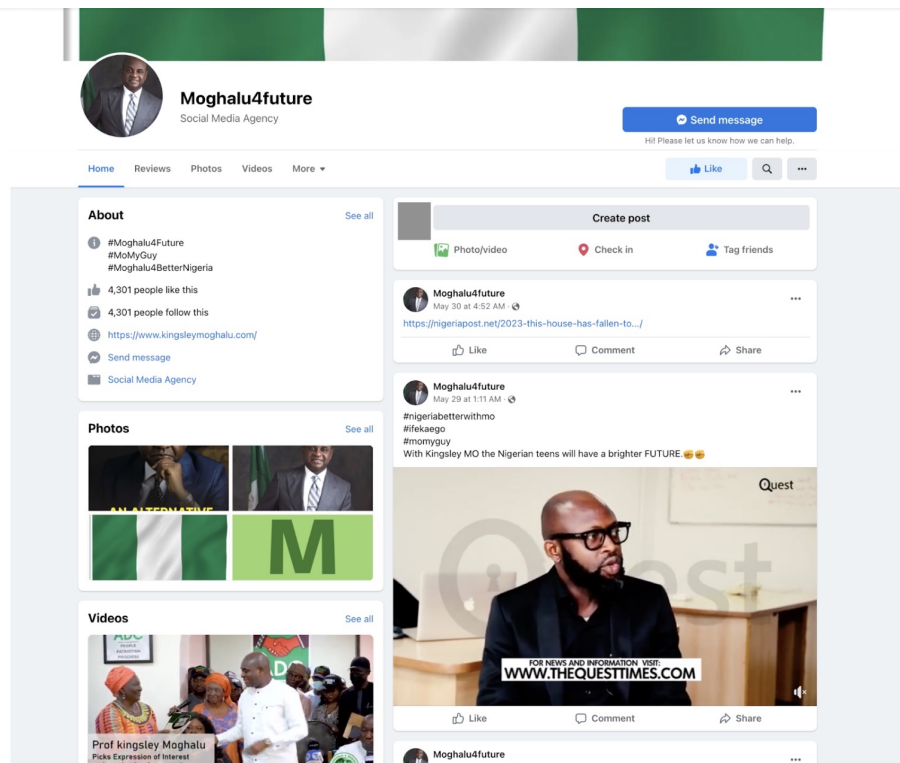
17

Figure 22: One of the pro-Moghalu Facebook Pages.

There were unusual audience patterns with the Nigerian Instagram accounts as well. Several of these accounts had between 8,000 and 25,000 followers, but just a handful of low engagement posts. See, for example, Figure 24.

Figure 23: Comments, some in Portuguese, all from individuals with Portuguese names, on a Facebook Page about Nigeria.
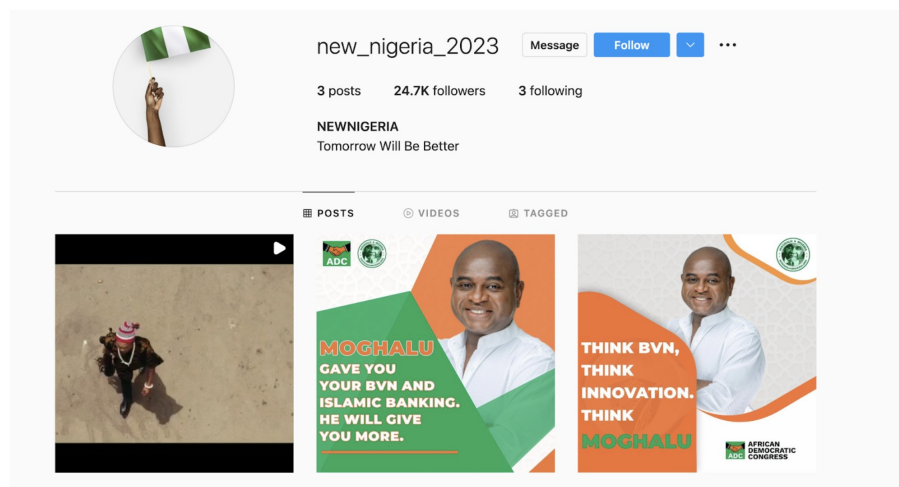
Figure 24: An Instagram account with just three visible posts, and almost 25,000 followers.

6 Conclusion

In many ways this network was typical of modern political disinformation campaigns: a digital marketing firm led the operation, narratives praised some politicians and criticized others, and there was evidence of inauthentic engagement. The open source evidence suggesting part of the network was linked to the government of Angola, however, was unique, and some of the Palestinian cluster tactics to foster discontent with the Hamas government were also novel.

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