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A critical discourse analysis of how South African publics engaged in the social media platform, Facebook, over Nkandlagate in 2015

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ABSTRACT

The Nkandlagate scandal, in which the South African President, Jacob Zuma allegedly spent an estimated R246 million of taxpayers' money on the renovation of his Nkandla residence, created huge public outcry. This reached yet another height in 2015 when Zuma's administration declared that the President was not going to pay back the money as demanded by the South African publics. The publics of South Africa used social media platforms to express themselves over the decision. Studies have shown that social media platforms provide an opportunity for political mobilisation of publics and their participation in democracy. Using critical discourse analysis, this study seeks to investigate how South African publics engaged in the social media platform, particularly Facebook, over Nkandlagate. The research focuses on the discussions by two political parties' Facebook pages: an opposition party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and the ruling African National Congress (ANC). The analysis involves posts and comments made by South African publics on each of the Facebook pages to establish how South Africans made use of Facebook to express themselves over Nkandlagate, how the two parties covered Nkandlagate and what kind of discourse emerged from the parties' posts. The concepts used in this research include the networked public sphere, democracy, watchdog and collective will/opinion. Three dimensions of critical discourse analysis were used for data analysis in this study: description (text genres), interpretation (discursive type) and explanation (social practice.) The insights of South African publics social practices were recognised. This research argues that to a large extent, social media has provided South African publics with access to Facebook a public sphere through which democracy – particularly in terms of freedom of speech – is exercised. However, there is a lack of democratic interaction in that although there was interactive engagement amongst publics, there was a lack of interactive engagement between politicians and publics.

Keywords: *Social media, public sphere, Facebook, democracy, Nkandlagate*