



By Leonard Wanyama



By the time you read this, you would have already received your daily dose of fake news. The extended electioneering mode in which Kenya finds itself is fertile ground for what Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard from the University of Oxford have described as cyber troops, trolls and troublemakers, who are organised to manipulate all forms of media for political aims.

You would have already encountered well-choreographed events, strangely engineered election petitions, shadowy non-profit organisations, dodgy lobby groups and all manner of consultants sprouting all over and pitching one alternative version of news against those of their opponents as they try to win you over.

This is the environment in which political consultants tend to thrive in, as depicted in *Get Me Roger Stone*, a fascinating documentary about Roger J. Stone Jr., the political consultant who helped President Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton in last year's American election.

Stone's forte is in the use of opposition research and the promotion of falsehoods and conspiracy theories for the Republican Party's electoral base. A veteran of the conservative movement, he is constantly referred to as a "dirty trickster" and the "prince of darkness" who is well versed in party infighting and raw politicking.

Watching this movie during this era of fake news, it wouldn't hurt to call Mr. Stone the "Godfather" of all foreign political consultancies currently strutting across the African continent, such as BTP Advisers, Cambridge Analytica, and Bell Pottinger.

A self-styled agent provocateur, Stone's life is framed within the context of how the Republican Party has transformed itself from the New Right of Ronald Reagan to the Alternative Right, or Alt-Right, of the Trump administration. This is thanks to his various roles in US elections as explained by the film, which follows him while he went about his business during the course of the 2016 election.

Starting out as a Republican student activist and political prodigy, Stone was a young campaign staffer for the Committee to Re-elect the President for a second term during the Richard Nixon administration. He was the youngest individual to be mentioned in the Watergate scandal for receiving campaign funds to conduct dirty political tricks.

Despite his Watergate infamy, he got elected to lead the Young Republicans in 1977 and prior to that had worked as a regional coordinator for the Ronald Reagan campaign, helping the latter to get elected president. Once Reagan was in power, Stone enriched himself using insider networks to form the most notorious lobbying firm in US history with his friends Paul Manafort (Trump's campaign manager for a time), Charles R. Black Jr. and Peter G. Kelly.

Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelly (collectively known as the BMSK lobbying firm) came to be referred to as the "Torturers Lobby" for representing the interests of tyrants like Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Jonas Savimbi of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), and Mohammed Siad Barre of Somalia, among others, in Washington, before working for George H.W. Bush (The Elder), George W. Bush (The Younger) and now President Trump.

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You might recall Trump's inflaming promotion of the "birther" conspiracy about how former President Barack Obama was born in Kenya or the claim that a video existed in which Michelle Obama had used the derogatory racist word "whitey" that became the genesis of horrible memes depicting her as a gorilla. Well, the man at the heart of all that deviousness was one Roger Stone.

The film is peppered by Stone's Rules, crisp notes of advice from the man himself on what he has learned over the years. These are rules he seeks to pass on to all those who might like to apply them in the line of political consulting. The rules boil down to the fact that in politics you must do everything to win, short of breaking the law.

Other than the history of who was paid off in Washington to polish the image of the Daniel arap Moi regime, this film is important to watch because it will help you recognise how the cunning of Roger Stone is also wholesomely espoused by Kenyan political strategists and consultants.

About 30 minutes into the film, Stone's career skeletons should interest Kenyans, as it emerges why his BMSK lobbying firm was described as being the "sleaziest of them all" during the 1980s. A newspaper clip is highlighted listing BMSK's "blood money" clients in Somalia, Zaire, Nigeria, Peru, the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic and UNITA during the height of the Cold War.

Essentially, these credentials should crown him as the kingpin of foreign political consultancies that have become a feature of the past three Kenyan elections. Whether it is lone rangers like Dick Morrison, who was Raila Odinga's strategist in the 2007 election, or companies such as BTP and

Cambridge Analytica that have been associated with Uhuru Kenyatta's campaigns, Roger Stone is nothing less than their patron in the dark art of public relations.

Bell Pottinger in South Africa is a case in point. The disgraced British firm ran a racist campaign to distract the public from debating corruption and state capture by the Gupta family. This is the characteristic fear mongering practised in various campaigns similar to the ingenious "sleazeball" tactics of Stone as shown in the documentary.

As observed by Jane Mayer, author of *Dark Money* and writer for the *New Yorker*, "Roger Stone is very smart about anger. It's one of the things he understands best." Indeed, one of Stone's rules states that "hate is a more powerful motivator than love" and so it makes perfect sense for these consultancies to heavily invest their strategies on getting into people's heads through "working up hate" and pushing the limits of sensationalism.

Other than the history of who was paid off in Washington to polish the image of the Daniel arap Moi regime, this film is important to watch because it will help you recognise how the cunning of Roger Stone is also wholesomely espoused by Kenyan political strategists and consultants. This is how a sizeable number of Kenyans have come to solely believe in Machiavellian strategies, as seen from growing following of the Fort Hall School of Government that has recently even quoted Roger Stone in one of its webisodes.

Political operatives, therefore, see nothing wrong in firing up political bases to vote for preferred candidates by infecting the electorate with diversionary rage, at all costs, so as to "ride the crest" of tribal anger to power. As observed by Dr. Joyce Nyairo, in her book *Kenya @50: Trends, Identities and Political Belonging*, such operatives are part of the cultural imagination and innovative performances in electoral politics. They compete against other numerous societal participants to tap uncharted spaces that allow for the borrowing of idioms and the adoption of anthems so as to reach out to audiences using various mediums, all in the name of acquiring political dominance over other forms of cultural existence.

By priming audiences using their various diversionary means, these entities seek to create euphoric influences that will ensure a win for their candidates. They do this by using the dramatic impact of entertainment or by bombarding people with compelling messages that use images, symbols, metaphors, timing or topical angles that serve as distractions from the issues at hand.

Due to their easy access to various portable forms of media, middle class Kenyans are the most suitable subjects for political manipulation. The explosion of new Internet applications is driving their access to incessant instant news but is also encouraging an averseness to in-depth perspectives.

Unfortunately, for a majority of the middle class, this environment makes them the most out of touch with reality. This is because their embrace of twisted social media has cut them off from more reliable information sources. As the most ardent consumers of Internet content, they become the guinea pigs of various political narratives. These test-run messages are then shifted onto mainstream media, based on results of their reactions to further influence the masses.

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Social media, in particular, allows them to quickly examine, appreciate and critique messages in mainstream or alternative media before they are refashioned by political consultants and released in different but more palatable versions to the general public. This inclines the middle class to be trapped in the entertainment of crass political gamesmanship that seeks only to make one's opinion dominant rather than to offer constructive debate that could convince others to make rational decisions - a condition which is then synthesised down to the masses by either television or radio.

Every piece of shock-and-awe negative advertising, disruption, distortion, misinformation, half-truth or innuendo is pumped through their social cycle or a web circle of "breaking news", thereby completely distorting the value of information and perverting their world views. This allows the wolves of information to continue their trade as seen from the opinions of Michael Caputo, an associate of Stone, who says:

"Roger taught me when I was very young...the media is two things, they are either evil or they are lazy or they are both and if you understand that you can do whatever you want."

Watching the sophistry of the Kenyan election in relation to the account of Roger Stone in the film, one cannot help but notice that, like any other ruling class across the world, Kenya's elite understand and are quite skilled in manipulating grassroots aspirations through the use of money or simplistic messaging to activate "slash and burn" politics.

The similarities are striking and we may have to ask what the foreign public relation firms mean for Kenyans and the country. Is hate really the only game in town? How do we package the desire for prosperity as a compelling cross-cutting message in pursuing the "heritage of splendour"?

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Regrettably, we continue in the use of crude language in order to milk resentments or instigate anger from the masses. This is so that whatever kind of fringe idea is presented to the public not only gets noticed but is also taken up as gospel truth. Such games are played to access and trade in establishment goodies with no concern for service delivery.

Everything and everywhere, from senior jobs, land, properties, contracts, licences, educational bursaries to loans in the power, transport, communication, manufacturing and finance sectors, among others, would be up for grabs by politicians, their appointees, and other broader members of their patronage networks.

Building such close political ties and personal relationships is meant to serve as the ultimate back channel to enjoying the opportunities for individual advancement through the acquisition of wealth or property, as exemplified by Stone and his associates, who ingeniously promoted this phenomenon with their creation of the National Conservative Political Action Committee that was not afraid to use fear as a political tool.

Closer home, the shenanigans of a sneaked-in business version of the National Super Alliance (NASA) manifesto, or the media fiasco surrounding the Friends of Jubilee (FoJ) fundraiser cum Political Action Committee (PAC) operations that involved civil servants can be viewed as exceptional cases in point on how such entities manifest themselves in our politics.

The beneficiaries of serious crimes, corruption or corporate wrongdoing are the main promoters of this confusing environment. Blocking the noise created by this competition for media attention and control is obviously a high priority for the continuation of harmony within our republic.

Now if you don't like the idea in media that "sensationalism sells" then you haven't seen anything yet. Though *Get Me Roger Stone* is set in America, the documentary will let you see the emerging world in which outrageousness brings in bigger bucks, unleashes bolder headlines, sells your soul faster to the highest bidder, manipulates your emotions and leaves you "high and dry", so to speak.

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