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Op-ed

WHEN WORDS WOUND THE NATION: SOCIAL MEDIA, RACISM AND SOCIAL COHESION

By Daryl Swanepoel

After spending more time than usual on social media over the holiday period, one uncomfortable realisation lingered with me long after the scrolling stopped. Beyond the gloom, the despair and the reflexive pessimism, there was something else at work in our digital public square, something darker, more corrosive and ultimately more dangerous for a society still trying to heal.

Racism has found a renewed and disturbingly casual home on social media.

Not always in its crudest form. Often it appears as insinuation, mockery, selective outrage or the framing of complex social problems in crude racial binaries. Sometimes it is justified as "telling uncomfortable truths". Sometimes as "punching back". Sometimes it hides behind irony or humour. But whatever its form, its cumulative effect is the same, it chips away at the fragile fabric of social cohesion that South Africa cannot afford to lose.

South Africans carry deep historical trauma. That is an unarguable fact. Race remains a powerful organising force in our society, because inequality, exclusion and memory still track racial lines in ways that cannot simply be wished away. But social media has become less a space for working through this reality and more an arena for acting it out. Platforms reward emotional release over reflection. Outrage travels faster than understanding. Dehumanisation attracts more engagement than dialogue.

What worries me is not disagreement, disagreement is healthy. What worries me is the normalisation of racial contempt and the growing comfort with speech that reduces fellow citizens to caricatures, enemies or abstractions. Once that threshold is crossed, something essential is lost: the idea that we are still, despite everything, engaged in a shared project.

Social cohesion is often spoken about as if it were a soft, sentimental aspiration, something nice to have once the "real" problems are solved. In truth, it is the opposite. Social cohesion is an enabling condition. Without it, institutions struggle to function, economic recovery falters and democratic legitimacy erodes. When trust collapses, not only in the state, but in one another, societies fragment into hostile camps that see compromise as surrender.

Racist and hateful speech accelerates that fragmentation. It hardens identities. It transforms social and economic failures into racial indictments. It convinces people that coexistence is no longer possible, only domination or retreat. History offers countless examples of where that road leads, and none of them end well.

This is why the conversation about racism on social media cannot be reduced to a binary debate about "free speech versus censorship". That framing is too blunt, and too lazy, for the reality we face.

Two things are necessary if we are serious about nation-building.

First, social media regulation is no longer optional. Platforms are not neutral conduits, they are powerful systems that amplify content according to engagement, not social consequence. Around the world, democracies have begun to accept that unregulated digital spaces can do real harm to social stability. Regulation does not mean suppressing dissent or silencing unpopular views. It means drawing enforceable lines where speech violates dignity, incites harm or systematically undermines equality, principles that are already embedded in our Constitution.

Second, and just as important, institutions, organisations and civic movements must take responsibility for the spaces they control. Those who operate influential social media platforms cannot plausibly claim to stand for nation-building while allowing comment sections to become repositories of racial abuse, insinuation and hatred. Silence in these spaces is not neutrality, it is abdication.

Calling out racist and hateful remarks, removing such content from public feeds, and, where conduct crosses legal thresholds, reporting it to bodies such as the South African Human Rights Commission even if they have been in support of one's own stance, is not an act of censorship. It is an affirmation that rights come with responsibilities, and that dignity is not negotiable.

This responsibility applies across society. It applies to political movements, advocacy organisations, civil society groups, media platforms and individual users alike. The size of one's audience should increase, not dilute, one's sense of accountability.

There is also a deeper, more uncomfortable truth we need to confront. Racism on social media often feels cathartic. It gives voice to anger. It offers moral certainty. It simplifies a complicated world into heroes and villains. But catharsis is not healing. In fact, it often deepens the wound it claims to expose. South Africa does not need enforced politeness. It needs moral seriousness. It needs a public culture capable of holding historical injustice and present responsibility in the same frame, without collapsing into either denial or dehumanisation. It needs citizens willing to insist that how we speak about one another matters, because it shapes how we treat one another.

If despair corrodes agency, then hate corrodes solidarity. And without solidarity, imperfect, contested, but real, no amount of policy reform will hold.

The challenge before us is not to pretend that race no longer matters, but to refuse to let racism become the language through which all disagreement is expressed. That is not reconciliation by amnesia. It is reconciliation by discipline.

In the end, nation-building is not only something governments do. It is something societies practice, daily, in the words they choose, the lines they draw, and the standards they refuse to abandon. Social media has made that task harder. It has not made it optional.

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