

R. Makombe
B. Sinyonde
M. Tladi
S. Thambo

Affective economies of racism on social media: A critical analysis of selected South African white supremacist Facebook pages

ABSTRACT

New media technologies and social networks have not only opened up spaces for civic engagement and democratic participation, but have also offered alternative sites for the proliferation and circulation of racist, homophobic and xenophobic sentiment. This article draws on Ahmed's idea of "affective economies" and Ekman's (2019) notion of "affective publics" to investigate how white supremacist groups in South Africa have used social media to express racist views, attitudes and sentiments. The internet in general and social networks in particular are based on a libertarian logic that emphasises freedom of speech at the expense of the rights of minorities whose views may not meet the required algorithmic thresholds of specific social media sites. While governments around the world have put in place laws to deal with overt racism and hate speech, online platforms remain new battlegrounds for the articulation of racist views and sentiments. The findings of the study show that white supremacist groups in South Africa use social media as a platform to re-contextualise and re-mediate topical issues in South African society and ramp up group solidarity by circulating racist views that undermine and de-legitimise the ruling party (the African National Congress) and its policies.

Keywords: affective publics, internet, South Africa, apartheid era, African National Congress, black South Africans

Rodwell Makombe is Associate Professor in the Department of English Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of the Free State. His areas of research interest include postcolonial literary studies, gender, resistance in literature and social media studies.

Bright Sinyonce is a PhD student in the Department of English Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of the Free State.

Mpitseng Tladi is a Masters student in the Department of English Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of the Free State.

Saneliso Thambo is a PhD student in the Department of English Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of the Free State.

INTRODUCTION

Developments in the global arena such as the rise of terrorism and the immigration crises in Europe and the United States have re-ignited racist sentiments and stereotypes against groups perceived as racial or cultural outsiders. In the global North, Arabs, Muslims and Africans have increasingly become targets of discrimination, either as potential terrorists or bogus asylum seekers threatening the social fabric of Western society. This has also created a conducive platform for the rise of far-right populist groups that ride on the wave of anti-immigration and anti-terrorist sentiment to push homophobic, racist and xenophobic agendas. This study is particularly interested in investigating how racist groupings, emboldened by developments in the global arena and socio-economic challenges in specific countries, have taken advantage of the affordances of social media to share and circulate racist views and sentiments. Racism can be defined as “behaviour that expresses hatred, exhibited in written, verbal or physical form against the ethnicity or physical appearance of a group or an individual” (Chetty & Alathur, 2019:44). In a study that identifies and categorises racist language on social media, Tulkens et al. (2016) found that legislated definitions of racism are limited because they tend to focus on overt racism in the form of discrimination and violence while neglecting subtle forms of racism that manifest through language, especially on online platforms. Tulkens et al. (2016:3) adopt what they call a “common sense” definition of racism which includes “all negative utterances, negative generalizations and insults concerning ethnicity, nationality, religion and culture”. For the purposes of this analysis, we adopt Chetty and Alathur’s (2019) and Tulkens et al’s (2016) definitions of racism. However, we are aware that racism, both as a concept and practice, is “extremely complex” (Van Dyk, 1991) and difficult to define. Oftentimes, the interpretation of racism and what is racist behaviour cannot be universalised because it depends on specific contextual circumstances. Van Dyk (1991) notes that despite the availability of empirical evidence and theoretical analyses on different aspects of racism, “much confusion and differences of opinion remain about the specifics and precise delimitation of the concept of racism” (Van Dyk, 2015).

In the context of South Africa, racist sentiment tends to draw on the ideologies and patterns of thought which were fostered and enabled by the apartheid system. Jakubowicz (2017) argues that “racists are more likely to exist in societies that are racially demarcated, with histories of racist oppression, and in hierarchies where race is associated with privilege or liability”. South Africa has a long history of racism, which has its origins in colonial policies of racial segregation. Although the dawn of democracy in 1994 and the enactment of equity and non-discriminatory laws has made it difficult for individuals and groups to overtly articulate racist views, social media has provided an alternative platform where unpopular and racist views continue to thrive. In recent years, South Africa has seen sporadic expressions of racism, especially on social media. In 2016, estate agent, Penny Sparrow was fined for likening black people to monkeys

who littered Durban beaches. The comment angered many South Africans because it revived apartheid-era racial stereotypes against black people. In the same year, another estate agent, Vicki Momberg was sentenced to two years in jail for using the k-word against a black police officer. The incident sparked debate on Facebook and Twitter, with some netizens calling on government to take harsh action against self-professed racists. In April 2020, a case of *crimen injuria* was opened against a Durban woman for referring to President Ramaphosa as “an ape acting like a first world President” on her Facebook page. All these cases show that online social media platforms have become outlets for individuals and groups to ventilate racist views. In 2019, the South African government developed the National Action Plan to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in response to the upsurge of racist sentiment in public discourse.

1. RACISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Online racism has become a major problem of the contemporary world. Jakubowicz (2017:42) submits that “the spread of cyber racism has become an increasingly prominent issue from Myanmar to India, from the USA to Africa, and throughout Europe”. Scholars such as Malmqvist (2015) have attributed this to the affordances of social media that allow users to participate on online social platforms without revealing their identities. Drawing on the notion of “online disinhibition” developed by Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012), Malmqvist (2015) argues that “under anonymous conditions, people lose, or give up, their sense of self and their adherence to norms and expectations of others,” making it easy for them to publicly express racist attitudes. In the words of Chaudhry and Gruzd (2019:2), “the perception of anonymity provided by many social media platforms offers an appealing opportunity for users to convey differing viewpoints” and in some instances, express hateful and hurtful opinions. More recently, there has been “a growing focus on the use of the internet for the recruitment and promotion of terrorist violence” (Jakubowicz, 2017:44). Given that most countries have legislation to combat hate speech and racism, online platforms have become safe havens for individuals to express views that they cannot otherwise express offline. In that sense, the internet has played a significant role in building the edifices of contemporary racism or what Matamoros-Fernandez (2017:931) defines as “platformed racism”. The notion of “platformed racism” emphasises the view that social media have become sounding boards of racism, responsible for the “amplification of racist discourses on digital platforms at the intersection of user practices, algorithms, interfaces, policies, and business models” (Farkas and Neumayer, 2020:3). Jakubowicz (2017) identifies three features of the internet that makes it a conducive platform for the cultivation and expression of racist ideologies. Firstly, the political economy of the internet favours freedom rather than control, thus creating safety nets for racists to propagate their views in the name of freedom of speech. “The ideal of enabling as much freedom of expression as possible has led to a plethora of new [media] outlets, giving rise to new forms of deception that blur traditional boundaries between journalism and opinion” (Tandoc et al., 2018, in Farkas & Neumayer, 2020:2). Secondly, the

ideology of the internet has been attached to “freedom without limits”, thus allowing individuals to express personal views without any regard for the rights of others. Thirdly, the very configuration of internet activity where billions of individuals interact with anyone anywhere “enhances the psychological dimensions of anonymity, disengagement, and dis-inhibition”, making people feel free to express controversial, and sometimes blatantly false, views without fear of victimisation. Although the internet has been a haven of racist ideas for some time, the explosion in racist demagoguery since at least 2010 has been fueled by political, economic and social crises around the world (Jakubowicz, 2017:46). The refugee crises in Europe and America have put immense pressure on the ability of governments to provide social services, leading to the rise of populist civic and political organisations that demand tougher legislation against immigrants and refugees. In the context of these socio-economic crises, the internet has become “a sort of weaponized, automated affective public” (Karpf, 2017:201-202) that rallies together like-minded communities and individuals.

In a study of the discursive construction of immigrants in user interactions on Facebook, Ekman (2019:206) demonstrates that anti-immigration and racist sentiments are moulded through interactivity between actors in an open digital space. Following the European immigration crisis of 2015, there has been a growing anti-immigrant sentiment across Europe, characterised by physical and verbal racist attacks on non-citizens. The rise of nationalist political groupings has also fanned racist ideologies that blame immigrants for the socio-economic problems in European countries such as Greece, Italy and Germany. In times of crisis, “these online publics harbour citizens’ emotions of insecurity and generate anti-immigrant attitudes” (Ekman, 2019:206). Online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide “spaces for xenophobic, racist and nationalistic discourse” and “contribute to a normalization of previously marginalized types of utterances, attitudes and opinions” (Ekman, 2009:207). This article analyses how online white supremacist groups in South Africa discursively construct the ruling party (the African National Congress) and black South Africans on social media. Ekman’s (2019:608) study shows that racist online groups often remediate and recontextualise mainstream news on negative topics such as “public unrest, cultural misunderstandings, social problems and economic costs” to support racist ideologies. Similarly, racist online groups in South Africa often recontextualise and remediate contentious topics such as the proposed introduction of the National Health Service, the Black Economic Empowerment policy and land distribution without compensation in an attempt to represent the ANC government in a negative light. In reinterpreting mainstream news items, racist online groups use textual amendments such as derogatory “naming strategies, selective extraction, reformulation of paragraphs or omission of explanatory factors in the story” (Ekman, 2019:608) to push a particular agenda. In a study of a Danish online platform that allowed participants to publish letters to the editors as news, Farkas and Neumayer (2020:13) argue that “authors misled readers by cherry-picking, decontextualising, simplifying, and overgeneralising information to support racist agendas, packaged as news articles”. Online racist groups “assemble storytelling practices, real-life experiences and affective responses that build not only on sentiments of disbelief, resentment, fear and hate but also on understanding,

recognition and in-group solidarity” (Ekman, 2019:609). Recently, in the context of the fight against the corona virus pandemic, a well-known South African radio personality, Gareth Cliff, took to social media to denigrate the South African government’s lockdown measures. To many black South Africans, the comment was construed as a manifestation of apartheid-era white bigotry and disrespect for black leadership. However, Cliff’s comments garnered support from some sections of South African society (mainly white), who insisted that the government should open up the economy and stop micro-managing citizens. Ekman (2019) intimates that “social media communication is characterized by affect and the circulation of emotions”. Oftentimes, the emotions circulated on social media find resonance with latent popular sentiment among certain groups.

While Cleland’s (2014:427) study of racism in English football shows that technological advances in communication have enabled racist and Islamophobic views to operate covertly across message boards, Orrù’s (2014 study of the representation of migrants in Italy, shows that migrants are often represented as responsible for anti-social activities such as theft, rape and gender-based violence. In articulating these racist sentiments, Facebook becomes “a public and political space where people feel free to interact, express personal opinions and make sense of the reality around them” (Orrù, 2014:130). Van Dijk’s study of “elite racism” in Western parliaments reveals that “discourse plays an important role in the production and reproduction of prejudice and racism” (Van Dijk, 1997:31). The way in which the elite talk about others ignite popular racist sentiment, especially on social media platforms. In the wake of the immigration crisis in Europe, studies have shown that online racism often amplified views expressed by nationalist politicians and other elites.

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This study is theoretically underpinned by Ahmed’s (2004) and Ekman’s (2019) notions of “affective economies” and “affective publics” respectively. The two theories are similar in that they both focus on how emotions influence public behaviour. While Ahmed draws on economic theories about the circulation of currency to theorise the circulation of affect, Ekman focuses on affective group solidarities enabled by online public platforms. In his study of affective economies, Ahmed (2004:117) sought to investigate how certain groups or individuals get to share emotions with each other and against others. In Ahmed’s formulation, “emotions play a crucial role in the ‘surfacing’ of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs”. It is the way emotions circulate between bodies and signs that makes it possible for individual and collective bodies to surface – that is come into being in support of a cause against others. Ahmed’s theory postulates that emotions are not a private matter, neither are they within nor without individuals. In fact, “the role of emotions, in particular of hate and love, is crucial to the delineation of the bodies of individual subjects and the body of the nation”. The implication is that emotions create individual and national bodies

because shared emotions (of hatred or love) unite groups. What is interesting in Ahmed's theory of "affective economies" is that the love of the nation is often used as justification for hating others. Those who hate do not see themselves as haters but as lovers of the nation (patriots) whose "good feelings (love, care, loyalty) are being 'taken' away by the abuse of such feelings by others" (Ahmed, 2004:118). In the Western/European context that Ahmed (2004) theorises, white subjects see themselves as victims because their gestures of love have been abused by others who have invaded their shores, taking their jobs and benefiting from free government services. Hatred is "economic" because it "does not reside in a given subject or object" but "it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement" (Ahmed, 2004:119). Those that have been abused (or see themselves as being abused) by immigrants circulate hatred amongst themselves while at the same time constituting the others as objects of hate. In affective economies, "emotions do things", they align individuals to communities (we belong together because we are under threat) and designate bodies to social spaces. In other words, "emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence)" (Ahmed, 2004:119).

The notion of "affective publics" was originally formulated by Papacharissi (2015) to refer to online communities of affect(ion) that share common interests. Drawing on Papacharissi's (2015) work, Ekman (2019) analysed online racist, homophobic and xenophobic solidarities that normalise racial expressions and overt racism. Thus, in Ekman's (2019) formulation, the notion of affective publics helps to make sense of the "circulation [and sharing] of emotions between subjects in a communicative space". The power of affective publics and affective economies is not in individuals who hold strong racist views about others, but in the circulation and consumption of those views online. Ahmed's idea of affective economies draws on the "Marxian critique of the logic of capital", where "the movement of commodities and money, in the formula M-C-M (money to commodity to money), creates surplus value". In the same way that money finds value in exchange, "affect is produced only as an effect of circulation". In the context of this analysis, we argue that hate or racism do not reside in individuals but in the process of circulating racist ideas. In his original formulation of the idea of affective publics, Papacharissi (2015) was referring to "networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiments". Although Papacharissi was specifically interested in positive networks, Ekman (2019:609) extended the concept to include "uncivil expressions including racism and hate". This article appropriates Ekman's (2019) association of racism and affect to argue that social media provide platforms for the circulation of affective economies of racism and racist attitudes.

3. METHODOLOGY

We collected data from three white supremacist Facebook pages, namely *Stop White South African Genocide*, *Say no to Affirmative Action* and *Stop Boer Genocide*. The pages were

identified and selected through a Google search using the keywords “Racism”, “South Africa” and “Facebook”. The search generated 31,000 results which consisted of links to other Facebook pages, websites and blogs about topical and contentious issues in South Africa. Since the objective of the study was to interrogate discourses of racism on social media, we narrowed our selection to Facebook pages that expressed derogatory and disparaging sentiments in line with our adopted definition of racism. We found a number of advocacy pages on Facebook but most of them looked abandoned and they did not have any followers. Others had changed their names and migrated to new sites. We, thus, selected pages that were active, with evidence of followers and robust debates on current issues in South Africa. The three Facebook pages that we finally selected matched our criteria because they were active, with a significant number of followers. Stop White South African Genocide had 31,204 followers and 29,807 people who liked the page, while Stop Boer Genocide had 1,579 followers and 1,555 people who liked the page. Say No to Affirmative Action had 12,534 followers and 12,609 people who expressed interest in the page. From each of the Facebook pages, we purposively sampled and selected approximately three posts that were derogatory and disparaging towards the targeted group, in line with Chetty and Alathur’s (2019) and Tulken et al.’s (2016) definition of racism. Since most of the posts were responses to specific issues obtaining in South Africa, we selected only posts that responded to specific discussion topics, namely land expropriation without compensation, the National Health Service Insurance bill, farm attacks, corruption, and the economy. We preferred these topics because they were current and highly contested in South Africa’s public domain. We thus categorised the data according to specific topics (themes) that the members of the three groups discussed. In order to conceal the identities of respondents, we used initials rather than the full names of participants.

4. AFFECTIVE PUBLICS OF RACISM ON THREE FACEBOOK PAGES

The three Facebook pages selected for this study, namely *Stop White South African Genocide*, *Stop Boer genocide* and *Say No to Affirmative Action*, show an underlying victim status that white supremacist groups have assumed in contemporary South Africa. The active words “stop” and “say no” in the names *Stop white South African Genocide* and *Stop Boer Genocide* reflect a defensive mode of self-preservation that has become the default position of racist affective economies. White supremacist groups exhibit a sense of insecurity and victimhood in relation to the new political dispensation post-apartheid. The names of the selected Facebook pages portray images of fear and defensiveness as if to say that white supremacist groups perceive themselves as under siege from a black society that seeks to usurp their accumulated apartheid-era privileges. In theorising what he calls “cumulative racism”, Fekete (2014) argues that racist ideas “travel from the fringe to the mainstream and back again”, triggering, nourishing and amplifying racist discourse. The white supremacist discourse of stopping unrestrained black power, also evident in the Democratic Alliance’s Campaign slogan of the May 2019 elections, “Stop ANC and EFF” suggest some kind of in-group solidarity which justifies the hatred of

others. In Ahmed's (2004:117) theorisation of affective economies, the hater is "presented as endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject". Although the names of the Facebook pages do not overtly mention black people, one can easily speculate that black people are the potential aggressors that must be "stopped" from inflicting harm on white South Africans. While farm murders in South Africa have increased over the years, characterising them as "genocide" is probably an attempt to mobilise emotions and attract local and global attention to the presumably endangered position of being white and disenfranchised in post-apartheid South Africa. The collective in-group sentiment expressed by respondents on the Facebook pages does not only show fear of the black "other" but also nostalgia for apartheid-era privileges. In Ahmed's formulation, "fear works to create a sense of being overwhelmed rather than being contained in an object, fear is intensified by the impossibility of containment" (2004:124). Participants on the three Facebook pages perceive post-apartheid policies such as affirmative action as the thing to be feared, hence the collective pushback expressed in the name "say no to affirmative action".

Say No to Affirmation Action is a platform where white supremacist groups and individuals express their views on government policies that threaten their interests in present day South Africa. The page features news headlines and newspaper stories in relation to the ANC's efforts to redress the injustices of the colonial past. In response to the government's recent resolve to change the constitution to facilitate land expropriation without compensation, most respondents on the page characterised the initiative as retrogressive and likely to destroy the economy. Ekman (2019) notes that racist groups achieve their objectives by recontextualising mainstream news, so that "news items transmute into news pervaded by an anti-immigration or racist agenda". Responding to the headline "*Land expropriation: Gwede Mantashe outlines ANC'S redistribution plan*", most respondents characterised the ANC's plan in negative terms. In the original article, Gwede Mantashe, Minister of Mineral Resources, is quoted as saying white South Africans who own "more than 12,000 hectares of land" will have to give away some of the land to the landless majority. Online racist groups thrive on "selective extraction, reformulation of paragraphs and omission of explanatory factors" (Ekman, 2019:608). The ANC's land distribution without compensation bill is thus portrayed as arbitrary and vindictive. This is evident in JP's response in which he/she argues:

If this is the level of intellectual discussion taking place in Letuli house [sic], South Africa is in more trouble than I thought. This confused old communist, Mantashe, does not have a clue as to the financial chaos and social anarchy a change in the Constitution is going to cause. After all these years being involved with ANC failure after failure Mantashe has not learnt a thing.

What is evident in this response is a negative attitude towards black leadership. Firstly, the respondent questions the intellectual abilities of the entire ANC leadership, thus implying that South Africa's economy is not safe in the hands of incompetent black leaders. The view that

South Africa is in “more in trouble than I thought” resonates with Steyn’s (2005) theorisation of white talk, which portrays black people as incompetent stewards of the economy. Mantashe, in JP’s view, does not understand the “financial chaos and social anarchy” that changing the Constitution would cause. The implication of JP’s contribution is that black people are intellectually deficient, economically illiterate and incapable of learning from their past mistakes. Thus, in spite of the many years he has been in the ANC, Mantashe has not learnt anything. The derogatory language “this confused old communist” discredits Mantashe not only based on his age but also based on his ideological convictions – “communist”. In the context of contemporary South Africa, the word “communist” connotes ideological and political irrelevancy. The implication is that South Africa is better off in white hands than in black hands. Blackness is associated with negativity: cluelessness, ageing, ideological irrelevancy, low intellectual acumen and inability to learn from previous mistakes. For JP, South Africa has been on a downward spiral of “ANC failure after failure” since 1994, and the ANC leadership has been too dumb (typical of black people!) to learn from their mistakes. What is evident in JP’s comment is Ahmed’s notion of the “economies of fear”, in which certain signs “increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to ‘contain’ affect”. Mantashe and the ANC become objects of fear through the circulation of signs that portray them as objects of fear on social media.

JP’s fear of the financial chaos and social anarchy that might ensue from land expropriation shows that he prefers the status quo rather than embracing “radical” policies that may cause economic upheaval. In response to JP’s views, OP asks the question “what do you expect from a nation with the average IQ of 75?” The implication is that black South Africans are intellectually deficient and therefore responsible for South Africa’s poor IQ score. This comment is racist in that it perpetuates colonial myths that associate blackness with lack, deficiency, nothingness. This is why Fanon’s (1952) protagonist in *Black skin, white masks* is invisible to the white world. Rationality, logic and common sense constitute the white domain, while ignorance and chaos constitute the black domain. Both JP and JO enjoy a sense of affective solidarity by constituting the other in negative terms, as intellectually inferior and thus incapable of rational thinking and efficient leadership. Another respondent, WW, argues that giving land to black people will lead to complete chaos in the agriculture industry. In his theorisation of colonial discourse and the construction of blackness in the colonial context, Fanon argues that blackness is synonymous with chaos: “Negroes are animals ... they go about naked ... and God alone knows ...” (127) what else they are capable of doing. According to the colonial logic, the list of things that black people are capable of doing is endless. Similarly, WW believes that if land is re-distributed to black South Africans, the agricultural industry will be thrown into disarray:

Can you imagine the stock theft and the stealing of farm implements because the land grabbers will not just be satisfied with a piece of land they want everything laid on for them, so that means they are going to steal like hell.

Affective economies thrive on the mobilisation of emotional solidarity. The sentiments expressed in these comments masquerade as expressions of love for South Africa rather than hate for black people. The implication is that the participant is only responding to the ingratitude and thievery of black “land grabbers” which is likely to destroy the economy. The problem is not that the participant anticipates and fears the chaos which is yet to come, it is, as Mbembe (2017:11) puts it, that the black man is portrayed as this “other-being ... for whom the negative ... penetrat[es] all moments of existence.” WW’s recourse to the imagination in mapping out the domain of blackness resonates with colonial fantasies – can you “imagine” the stock theft and stealing of farm implements? In WW’s formulation, black people are lazy; they want everything on a silver platter. While the previous respondent (JP) cast Mantashe as a clueless communist who cannot learn from his mistakes, WW portrays black South Africans as “land grabbers” who have no clue what to do with the land. The assumption here is that “land grabbers” cannot farm, and land distribution will only bring chaos. The subtle implication of this reasoning is that white South Africans have the ability (naturally bestowed) to utilise the land productively. Another respondent, RW, sees the ANC’S rhetoric of land expropriation as a ploy to engage in corruption. Like Fanon’s protagonist in *Black skin, white masks*, who is “overdetermined from without”, RW, as a white South African, overdetermines the ANC from without. RW “knows” the outcome of the ANC’s policy of land expropriation without compensation – only those with political connections will get the land:

I guess only the well-connected will get the land. Saying the privileged have to share then start giving part of your income to the underprivileged. Put your money were your mouth is ... What about the land purchased after 1994 and the title deeds are given to these farmers? Quite frankly that’s outright theft.

RW’s comment exhibits not only the linguistic plasticity of white talk (Steyn, 2005) but also Ekman’s (2019) strategies of remediation and re-contextualisation in racist discourse. Racist discourse legitimises white land ownership and dismisses attempts by a black government to expropriate land as “outright theft”. Although RW does not have any proof, he already “guesses” that land distribution will be marred with corruption. Fanon (1952) has told us that it does not matter how good a black man is, what matters is that one day he will falter and his true colours will come out. “The black physician can never be sure how close he is to disgrace” (Fanon 1952:89). However, as the foregoing discussion has shown, this proximity to disgrace does not apply only to the black physician but also the black politician. In her theorisation of discursive repertoires of whiteness, Steyn (2005) intimates that white talk is plastic and fluid. The plasticity and fluidity of white talk is evident when RW appropriates the ANC’s discourse of equity and redistribution to suggest that ANC politicians should start by giving away their personal wealth. If Mantashe is a genuine communist, he must start by distributing his salary to the poor. This view not only seeks to discredit the ANC’s policy but also to delegitimise the land expropriation agenda. RW’s comment presents a convoluted counter-narrative against land expropriation, similar to Ahmed’s theorisation of affective economies where those that hate the other claim to

do so for love: land distribution should not happen because we know the outcome – the ANC will bungle it and only the well-connected will get the land. In short, RW's position is that South Africa should abandon land expropriation and maintain the status quo.

On 4 August 2018, South Africa's main opposition party, the DA (Democratic Alliance) called for the removal of the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policy because it was not sustainable. In an article entitled "DA agrees to move away from 'unsustainable' BEE policy", posted on the Facebook page Say No to Affirmative Action, the DA allegedly argued that the BEE policy had failed because it was only benefiting the black elite. Most responses to this story supported the DA's position. One respondent, WC, challenged the racialised employment criteria promoted by the Equity Act, which he characterised as discriminatory:

It should be the best person for the job. Race should not determine who gets the job.

Other respondents described BEE as a racist policy that will destroy the South African economy. Others saw the DA's withdrawal of support for BEE as a realisation that they were losing white voters. One respondent, GW, characterised the DA under the leadership of Mmusi Maimane as a "socialist bunch of hoodlums" who, through their support of BEE "supported the utter destruction of this economy and chased the qualified job creators abroad". Another respondent, GM, argued that BEE was an insult to black people because "it insinuate[d] that they are incapable of achieving anything without a handout or getting anywhere in life without racist policies". What is outstanding in these comments is the anger and aggression directed at the political economy of post-apartheid South Africa. Some commentators expressed the view that the DA should take a radical white supremacist stance against the ANC's policies. Thus, one respondent, SG, labeled the then DA leader Mmusi Maimane as an "idiot" for refusing to take a white supremacist stance. The comments revealed a collective sense of resentment not only against the BEE policy but also against black leadership in both the DA and the ANC. Some respondents intimated that the DA had become useless because of its weak stance against anti-white rhetoric, land expropriation and other policies of the ANC.

In June 2018, South Africa's Minister of Health, Aaron Motsoaledi, presented a proposal for a National Health Insurance (NHI) policy aimed at improving the quality of health services for the majority of South Africans. The bill came against the backdrop of a dysfunctional health system where the majority of the population (mainly black) depends on under-resourced public health institutions while the minority (mainly white) has access to well-resourced private health institutions. The government's intention, through the National Health Insurance Bill, was to rationalise the distribution of resources in the health sector and achieve equity. However, members of the Facebook page, *Stop Affirmative Action*, dismissed NHI as another disastrous project of the ANC. One respondent, JM, dismissed NHI as a ploy by the ANC government to siphon state resources through corruption.

Where has National Health worked? (not in the UK or America.) This is going to be

another ANC disaster and a strong possibility of more corruption. We already are short of qualified medics and nurses. Dear heaven what are they smoking?

This comment circulates fear, which according to Ahmed (2004) does not reside in individual subjects but in the anticipation of what might happen, what might go wrong. The thought of the passing of the NHI bill is a threat that causes fear. JM draws on colonial myths that portray the West as “the center of the earth and the birthplace of reason, universal life, and the truth of humanity” (Mbembe, 2017:11). If something did not work in the UK and America, it would not work anywhere. Therefore, NHI would not work in South Africa. What is evident in this argument is a colonial logic that portrays Europe/America as domains of rationality and order while Africa is a domain of disorder and chaos. The comment suggests that the architects of the NHI did not do their homework because they did not know that NHI has never worked anywhere. Thus, black politicians are portrayed as ignorant and completely out of touch with reality as implied by the question, “what are they smoking?”. Another participant, AC, ventilated his racist views by portraying the ANC as habitual failures:

When is the ANC going to get anything right??? What is wrong with them? Who do they think is going to support this financially? Do they honestly think that there is a never ending supply of money? Just another disaster with compliments from the ANC. They need to go`

AC believes that something is wrong with the ANC and not with South Africa’s broader macro-economic environment. The numerous questions that AC asks imply that ANC leaders make decisions without considering the consequences. The ANC has political power but it does not understand economics. The comment subtly associates black leaders with foolishness, intellectual deficiency and incompetency. Another respondent, PS, dismisses the ANC as “a handful of morons calling the shots without thought to consequences”. In his theorisation of the persistence of colonial reason in the postcolonial world, Maldonado-Torres argues that absence of rationality translates into the absence of being in others. If the ANC is “a handful of morons” as this respondent puts it, the implication is that those who vote for them are also morons. We also notice that most of the commentators ascribe negative labels on black leaders without saying anything about the positive attributes of whites.

The discourse of “morons” (black politicians) who masquerade as angels of social justice directly positions white supremacists in the sphere of rationality and economic prudence. The implication is that white people would naturally rule South Africa better than black people would. As one respondent, IB, puts it, “there is no cure for stupid”, and no one in the ANC is “forward thinking” enough to see that the NHI is not viable in South Africa. Blackness is thus equivalent to incurable stupidity. The anger that is evident in most of the comments reveals that the currency of racist sentiment is emotions shared by like-minded individuals and groups. The majority of the respondents believe that South Africa’s present socio-economic challenges confirm the inability of black people to govern. One respondent, SS, intimates thus:

There's only one thing [black people] can do ... they fuck everything up ... notwithstanding the fact that they know nothing about anything. Their shortsightedness in governing anything will always be a catastrophe.

This comment not only associates black people with destructive tendencies but also with ignorance, which seems to be endemic in their kind. The comment fixes black people as perpetually ignorant and incapable of doing anything effectively. This view resonates with Bhabha's (1994:66) theorisation of colonial discourse as "a paradoxical mode of representation which connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition". In identifying black people as different, SS creates a cultural and racial hierarchy in which white is positive and black is negative. This racial and cultural hierarchisation is also evident in BS's comment:

What a total bunch of dumb idiots. Your health system HAS collapsed, you have let down the poorest of the poor and yet you sprout utter nonsense about the health system NOT being in a state of collapse.

By using the second person pronoun "you" and "your" to refer to black people and their health service, this respondent not only affirms the racialisation of South Africa's institutions but also acknowledges that whites and blacks do not use the same services. BS refers to the "collapsed" health system as "your health system", to imply that he/she does not use public health institutions. The manner in which this respondent dismisses then Health Minister, Aaron Motseledi's views as "utter nonsense" implies racial superiority, which translates to intellectual superiority.

While the page *Stop Affirmative Action* is preoccupied with resisting redistributive justice and defending white privilege, *Stop White South African Genocide* and *Stop Boer Genocide* focus on internationalising the plight of white South Africans. The groups, *Stop White South African Genocide* and *Stop Boer Genocide* portray South Africa as a country that is descending into the abyss of postcolonial lawlessness and disorder. White South Africans are portrayed as victims of a lawless country run by incompetent people. Genocide is not only conceptualised as the deliberate targeting and killing of white people but also the systematic exclusion of whites from the mainstream economy through racialised legislation. One respondent, GF, on the page *Stop White South African Genocide* states:

Very few of the English-news media in #SouthAfrica report Black-on-White violent incidents on Farms [...] The @Mail&Guardian also appeared to have a policy to NOT report any "Black-on-White" violence on #farms at all – they reported only white-on-black incidents [...] the race of the perpetrators determines the frequency in which Farm Attacks are reported in SA..

Appropriation of victimhood as social capital is one of the discursive strategies of online racism.

This respondent portrays whites as victims of a biased English media that does not report black-on-white violence. The respondent not only claims media bias but also resuscitates the English-Boer rivalry of the apartheid era by claiming that the English have joined ranks with blacks at the expense of their other white (Afrikaner) counterparts. The view that English media silences “Black-on-White violence” through intermittent coverage constructs a white victimhood connected to the post-1994 shift of political power.

Another post in this category is a response to an image of a young white woman, allegedly killed in a farm attack. The image is accompanied by the caption:

This beautiful lady was murdered in her home last night. She leaves a 1 month old baby and a fiancé. My friends outside of SA PLEASE SHARE. This country is out of control. Each day is a risk for all of us in our homes and in the streets. It's incredibly hard to remain positive while our country descends into total anarchy.

In his study of anti-immigration social media discourse in Italy, Orrù (2014:122) notes that racist discourse has “strong propensity to dramatise events” and conjure images of imminent doom. Although the post above does not overtly mention the race of the perpetrators, the implication is that blacks killed the “beautiful” woman. The unnamed perpetrators are evidently brutal given that the murdered woman left a one-month-old baby. The respondent (KP) desperately pleads with his friends outside South Africa (probably white people across the globe) to share or internationalise the plight of white people in South Africa. This message is clearly sensationalised to portray South Africa as a country on the brink of collapse. KP's post dramatises the sad story (real or fabricated) of an innocent woman who was, allegedly, butchered in the privacy of her home. In the image, the woman has a smile on her face, her arm around her husband's waist, to imply that she had a happy family life. Both the inscription and the caption construct the perpetrator(s) as heartless, thus casting them as enemies of the endangered in-group.

In another post on the page *Stop South African White Genocide*, a respondent, MT, expresses concern over the anti-white rhetoric of the South African opposition party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). MT perceives the Afro-radical stance of the EFF as a threat to the security of whites, especially on the farms. Ahmed (2004) argues that “while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure, they still work to bind subjects together”. The perceived threat of violence from the EFF brings together those that feel threatened:

The controversial EFF leader brazenly refused to confirm or deny allegations that he is involved in organising the killings. EFF leader Julius Malema does not seem too worried about explosive allegations made by Afriforum Deputy CEO Ernst Roets at the launch of his book *Kill the Boer*, saying that he met with an imprisoned gang member and offered to help him murder white farmers when he gets out of jail

The allegation that Julius Malema is responsible for co-ordinating farm attacks is probably an attempt to counter his land expropriation without compensation rhetoric. By claiming that Malema attempted to pay a gang leader to facilitate the killing of white farmers, the respondent not only wants to single out the perpetrators of violence against white farmers as blacks but also suggest that the killings are not spontaneous but organised by black politicians. While this allegation tarnishes Malema's image, it also portrays South Africa as a criminal state where high profile politicians can hire gangsters to commit crime. What is emphasised in this post is that white South Africans have become soft targets of politically motivated criminality.

In another post, a respondent, JK, equated South Africa's situation to that of Zimbabwe, whose economy collapsed because of a chaotic land reform programme. This comparison not only benchmarks South Africa's challenges with those of other countries in the region but also warns South Africa against embarking on populist policies that could collapse the economy. The argument is that the case of Zimbabwe not only proved that land expropriation was unsustainable but also demonstrated that giving land to black people would collapse the economy.

When Zimbabwe's Marxist dictator Robert Mugabe confiscated the land of white farmers, disaster ensued. The country was once a breadbasket, but after the white farmers were chased out, agriculture collapsed. The economy was ruined. Inflation ran rampant. Zimbabweans began to starve and food aid became necessary'

JK labels Robert Mugabe "a Marxist dictator" and thus a bad example for South Africa. The message is that South Africa should avoid land distribution because it will produce the same results it produced in Zimbabwe. On the surface, this might come across as sound economic advice, however, the emphasis on the consequences of confiscating "white farmers land" shows that the respondent is not only concerned about the welfare of the South African economy but also that of white South Africans. This post implies that only "white" farmers are capable of producing food and if they are disturbed, the economy will collapse. JK portrays white South African farmers as synonymous with good governance and black farmers with a collapsed agriculture industry. VB, further insinuates this when he writes:

I wonder why the ANC haven't provided. It's been 24 years since they transitioned into government and they haven't delivered. So their only recourse is to steal land from everyone who has property or land? That's their only option, confrontation? - is this the mindset that governs the South African government, politicians like this! I wonder if Theresa May would have pledged £50 million over the next four years if she really knew the truth about the butchery in the hearts and minds of these despotic people.

In this post, VB accuses the ANC of failing to deliver without specifying what exactly it should deliver. One can only speculate that the ANC has failed to deliver basic services to the people. VB further suggests that the land expropriation agenda is the ANC's strategy to divert attention

away from its failures. The British Prime Minister, Theresa May, is portrayed as “one of our kind” – a fellow white who should not have donated money to “these despotic people” had she known about the “butchery” in their “hearts and minds”. The implication of this statement is that Theresa May should have helped South Africa on condition that it treats white South Africans with respect. VB’s comment exhibits an emotional attachment with Theresa May on the basis of skin colour. What is evident in most of the comments we have analysed so far is an emotive sense of distrust of black leadership and shared sentiments of fear and hatred of all things black.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that social media has become a conducive platform for the emotive performance, articulation and circulation of racist views and sentiments. Although South Africa has laws that criminalise the expression of racist sentiments and views online, social media remains a “safe” platform for racists because of its affordances such as use of nom de guerres to hide ones’ identity. Ahmed’s notion of “affective economies” and Ekman’s theory of “affective publics” (after Parachissi, 2015) are relevant in analysing how social media allows for the re-contextualisation and remediation of racist sentiment. Most of the comments posted on the three Facebook pages relied on shared fears and insecurities to circulate racist views that targeted those perceived as enemies of the in-group. To most of the respondents, the alleged failures of the ANC government affirmed colonial stereotypes of black people as intellectually deficient and incapable of governing themselves. The underlying message in most of the comments is that black politicians are incompetent and corrupt. While governments all over the world have put in place pieces of legislation to curb the proliferation of racist and hurtful utterances, social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, remain major platforms for the expression of overt and covert racism. This article recommends that governments, around the world in general, and the South African government in particular, should find ways of regulating social media platforms to ensure a balance between upholding freedom of expression and illegalising the expression of racist sentiments.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2004). Affective economies. *Social Text*, 79(22.2): 117-139.
- Bhabha, H.K. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Chaudhry, I. & Gruzd, A. (2019). Expressing and challenging racist discourse on Facebook: How social media weaken the “spiral of silence” theory. *Policy & Internet*, 12(1): 88-108.
- Chetty, N. & Alathur, S. (2019). Racism and social media: A study in Indian context, *International Journal of Web Based Communities*, 15(1): 44-61.

Cleland, J. (2014). Racism, football fans, and online message boards: How social media has added a new dimension to racist discourse in English football. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 38(5): 415-431.

Ekman, M. (2019). Anti-immigration and racist discourse in social media. *European Journal of Communication*, 34(6): 606-618.

Fanon, F. (1952). *Black skin, white masks*. (Transl. C.L. Markmann). London: Pluto Press

Farkas, J. & Neumayer, C. (2020). Mimicking news: How the credibility of an established tabloid is used when disseminating racism. *Nordicom Review*, 41(1): 1-17.

Fekete L. (2014). Anti-fascism or anti-extremism? *Race & Class*, 55(4): 29-39.

Jakubowicz, A. (2017). Alt_Right white lite: Trolling, hate speech and cyber racism on social media. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 9(3): 41-60.

Karpp D. (2017). Digital politics after Trump. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 41(2): 198-207.

Lapidot-Lefler, N. & Barak, A. (2012). Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact on toxic online disinhibition. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(2): 434-443.

Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of being. *Cultural Studies* 21(2/3): 240-270

Matamoros-Fernandez, A. (2017). Platformed racism: The mediation and circulation of an Australian race-based controversy on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. *Information, Communication, and Society*, 20(6): 930-946.

Mbembe, A. (2017). *A critique of black reason*. London: Duke University Press.

Orrù, P. (2014). Racist discourse on social networks: A discourse analysis of Facebook posts in Italy. *Rhesis. International Journal of Linguistics, Philology, and Literature*, 5(1): 113-133.

Steyn, M.E. (2005). "White talk": *White South Africans and the management of diasporic whiteness*: In Lopez, A.J. (ed.) *Postcolonial whiteness: A critical reader on race and empire*, 19-136. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Tandoc, E.C., Lim, Z.W., & Ling. R. (2018). Defining "fake news": A typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 137-153.

Tulkens, S., Hilde, L., Lodewyckx, E., Verhoeven, B., & Daelemans, W. (2016). A dictionary-based approach to racism detection in Dutch social media. Available from: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1608.08738.pdf> .

Van Dijk, T.A. (1997). Political discourse and racism: Describing others in Western parliaments. In Riggins, S.H. (ed.) *The language and politics of exclusion: Others in discourse. Communication and human values*, 24: 31-64.

Van Dyk, T.A. (1991). *Racism and the press*. London, New York: Routledge.