

Of Tweets and Hate Language

Twitter has taken the world of social networking by storm and tweeting has clearly become the most widely used and preferred communication medium by leading entertainment and sports personalities. The big distinction between it and Facebook is, whereas the latter mostly involves social interaction among people tied together by friendship and family values, Twitter has dominant individuals followed by both their peers and members of the public.

By [Knowledge Mushohwe](#) 12 Oct 2012

Tweeting has become an electronic outlet for eminent members of society to air their views on anything.

And just two weeks ago, Chelsea's Nigerian midfielder John Obi Mikel took to Twitter to apologise to the club's fans for his part in allowing Italian champions Juventus to come back from behind to draw 2-2 in the first Champions League group match at Stamford Bridge.

Mikel's sincere sentiments triggered a wave of comments, but just one stood out. An angry supporter posted a barrage of insults that included a racial slur.

The supporter not only labelled the midfielder "stupid", but took a further step by using the "N" word in the same sentence. Mikel is not the only sportsperson to be racially insulted on Twitter.

Fabrice Muamba, the now retired Bolton midfielder, suffered a similar fate during the time he was recovering from a life-threatening heart attack while playing for his team against Tottenham Hotspur.

While the majority of people the world over offered support to a skilled footballer that nearly lost his life in front of millions of television viewers, there were others that looked at the colour of his skin and found no sympathy.

There are many other stars that have been targeted by racists on their personal Twitter accounts.

Hate speech is a sure part of social networking and the reason why there is so much of it is simple.

The stars themselves are using Twitter to give information that they would normally not make available to the public.

The Twitter domain is not edited or controlled, it is raw emotion put in words.

Manchester United's Wayne Rooney, for example, tweets on a variety of subjects, complete with spelling and grammatical errors. Footballers sometimes use it to express anger and disbelief if relegated to the bench.

Other famous Twitter account holders are known to use foul language, including the "F" word.

Twitter is a platform that is uncensored and very open to abuse. A fact is that every computer literate person in the world lives, in varying degrees, a part of their lives online.

A lot of what already takes place within society is being transferred to the internet.

And because the internet is impersonal with a very small percentage of users having met each other, the online world offers unlimited freedom and the content there may be a reflection of actual societal views and feelings.

In the United Kingdom cases, the evidence shows racism is a big problem.

The online attacks on Muamba and Mikel are not isolated and there are similarities with the Patrice Evra incident during Manchester United's visit to Anfield in a league game last season and the now infamous John Terry saga during a game against Queens Park Rangers at Chelsea's Stamford Bridge.

Online racial attacks on Ashley Cole and Ashley Young after the Euros also showed that even giving your support for a national cause is never enough if one is covered from head to toe by the "wrong" skin pigmentation.

The fact that the London courts found Terry innocent of racial abuse yet the Football Association felt differently shows that not everyone is prepared to tackle the problem head on.

It doesn't have to be that way locally.

Fortunately, in Zimbabwe at the moment, there are very few people actively involved in tweeting.

Oliver Mtshodza is not tweeting, neither is Alick Macheso. If they are, then the media is not picking up what they are saying because more and more of today's breaking stories are interpretations of Twitter posts.

Zimbabwe has the time and opportunity to understand and learn from others about the negative dimension of social networking.

Knowing that Mikel's attacker was identified, charged and convicted of a hate crime should be hope to Zimbabwe's authorities that online abusers can be tracked down and punished.

For now, Zimbabwe's big online problem is not racism.

However, the amount of abuse through insulting remarks and thrown at political office bearers is so much that if the attackers were to be of a different colour to the victims, then chances are the number of racists would be higher by a few thousands more.

Facebook profiles and comments on Zimbabwean online news articles are littered with insult, mostly of a political nature.

Most are unaware that they may be committing a crime, especially when the insults are directed at the country's president.

The Public Order and Security Act No. 1 2002 (POSA), under Section 16, prohibits the publication of statements undermining the authority of the President or that are abusive, indecent or false about or concerning the President.

As Twittermania continues to expand and become more visible locally, it will not be long before difference in opinion degenerate into degrading violations of individuals' basic human rights.

And when this happens, parliamentarians that objected to several sections of the Interception of

Communications Bill in 2006 will hopefully see why it is so important for some form of regulation to be applied to the internet.

Western governments, though not as effective as they should be, are finding that the best way to tackle hax crimes is through monitoring and tracking online content and using their laws to protect the vulnerable citizens.

Source: [allAfrica](#)

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