

Addressing online racism in your organisation

Online racism differs from racism that is experienced in person. Although common themes arise when learning to recognise and address these issues, it is important to have the knowledge on how to combat the growing problem of racism which specifically happens online and on social media platforms.

Context:

Social media platforms provide a space for people to share opinions and connect with like-minded people from all over the globe. It can be used for positive purposes, such as to take part in activism, highlight resources, share information and provide current affairs updates in real time (as opposed to print media).

However, we know racism exists in our society and social media platforms are no exception. There have been prominent instances of online hatred in recent years, with [research](#) showing a link between online hate and the increase in far-right movements (such as in Brazil, US, India and the UK). [The UN](#) has also condemned the negative portrayal of ethnic minority communities in the media across the UK and raised concerns about the rise of racist hate speech online. This has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic as [research](#) shows that the shift towards online/hybrid working has worsened the abuse that individuals experience online, particularly for ethnic minority women and non-binary people.

Online platforms are being weaponised by white supremacists by committing hate crimes, oftentimes without repercussion, as there is little traceability to individuals who create anonymous accounts other than an IP address. Whilst there may be a variety of good intentions for having an anonymised profile on social media, this has also opened up platforms to misuse. It is difficult to identify the individual behind an anonymous profile due to the design of social media which has resulted in '[online trolls](#)' becoming a prominent feature across the majority of platforms, with racist trolls seeking attention and traction (i.e. likes and shares) at the expense of ethnic minorities.

Online hate comes in a variety of forms, including but not limited to: abusive language; derogatory comments; visual content (GIFs, memes, emojis) that mention colour, ethnicity or stereotypes in an offensive way; and inappropriate or criminal images. A very specific form of racism takes place online where the mere use of an emoji or graphic without words can insinuate racist tropes and perpetuate harmful rhetoric. For example, users commenting monkey emojis on football player [Marcus Rashford's](#) social media following the defeat of Manchester United in the Europa League in 2021.

Whiteness online

Social media companies themselves have previously been complicit in maintaining racialised oppression. For example:

- **Reddit**, known to be an unfiltered social community forum, has allowed for the cultivation of racist comments over the years, [ignoring the matter](#) for nearly a decade before taking action;
- **YouTube** is responsible for maintaining right-wing influencers on a platform where users are typically of a younger demographic (who are more impressionable) as detailed in this [report](#) from 2018;
- **Snapchat** and **Instagram** were called out for their '[digital blackface](#)' filter which Instagram only removed in 2021;
- **Facebook** took four years to [remove their advertisements with racist targeting](#);
- **TikTok** banned a user who criticised the [persecution of Uighur Muslims](#); and
- **Meta** was called out for [censoring Palestinian voices](#) during the Israeli attack in Gaza during May 2021.

Although these platforms can be places for individuals to highlight structural oppression and reveal the true impact of racism, most notably during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, when white-led tech giants are not quick to retaliate and respond to online hate, the message of white supremacy spreads further afield.

Currently, the [Online Abuse \(Reporting\) Bill](#) is on its 2nd reading in the House of Commons which, if passed, will require social media companies to publish reports setting out the action they have taken to address online abuse against people who share a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.

Bystander/Ally Intervention

There are several ways in which individuals and organisations can intervene when online racism occurs. The following is a non-exhaustive list of examples:

| Intervention | |
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| Recognising racism and white supremacy | This includes stereotyping, visual content, gaslighting, dog whistling, insults, abuse and harassment that you would not normally hear in public spaces in person. Being aware and educating yourself on what modern day racism looks like is a starting point. At organisational level, regular staff training on anti-racism, including current terminology, is recommended, particularly for staff working in communications. |

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| <p>Measured reactions</p> | <p>Calling out, retaliating with insults and ridicule are the type of actions that increase hostility and do little to actually improve the situation for ethnic minorities, and therefore are best avoided. Efforts to educate, provide evidence and further resources foster dialogue as a meaningful way to debunk racist rhetoric. It is important to reflect on what is the purpose of the interaction. What power and privileges do you have in countering racism online?</p> |
| <p>Strategising different actions for different platforms</p> | <p>Whilst there are similarities, each social media platform has their own way of processing and combatting online hate. It is important to not only understand the different processes that exist for reporting online hate on each platform, but also to understand what needs to be included in the reporting process for platforms to take action. Several platforms ask what type of content you are reporting including but not limited to: harassment; intimidation with violence; attacking an individual’s identity (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc); or sensitive or disturbing content.</p> |
| <p>Taking tangible action</p> | <p>Options available at an organisations discretion include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capturing a screenshot of the abuse; • Reporting users, comments and posts to the social media platform; • Reporting to the police, providing as much information to help pinpoint the perpetrator as possible and clearly explaining the offence; • Contact the victim and offer some emotional support. If the content has been reported, then inform them; • Don’t share the post/tweet/comment as the algorithms will lead to more attraction – remember, ‘trolls’ want attention. |

Responding

Employers have a duty to protect their workers’ health, safety and welfare both in the workplace and from risks arising from or related to their work under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. [The Health and Safety Executive](#) defines work-related violence as ‘any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work’ including verbal abuse or threats face-to-face, online and via telephone. In addition to this, the [Public Sector Equality Duty](#) places additional responsibilities on public bodies who must have due regard to: eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation; advance equality of opportunity; and foster good relations between ethnic minorities and white people.

Not having online intervention as a priority or doing nothing in fear of saying the wrong thing can perpetuate the different types of abuse ethnic minorities face, including hate crime and cyberbullying. The lack of desire to directly address online racism, evidenced by low response rates and absence of zero tolerance policies, does not challenge the power structures and discomfort required to be an actively anti-racist organisation or provide safety for ethnic minority employees.

| Methods of responding | |
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| <p>No response</p> | <p>It is important to note that no response should not be an option. No response allows for racism to fester as the lack of accountability continues. This gives further confidence to perpetrators to continue with racism (microaggressions, dog whistling, overt racist comments etc) that belittles ethnic minorities in an online public sphere.</p> <p>A standard procedure that is clear should be in place that provides guidance to communications staff on what action to take without the need to wait for authorisation, subject to the risk of harm.</p> |
| <p>Zero tolerance approach</p> | <p>Organisations should have a zero tolerance approach with staff, members, stakeholders and service users should they be in breach of acceptable behaviour. The same level of attention and priority must be given to racism that is given to any other types of abuse and harassment, whether this takes</p> |

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| | <p>place online or in a physical space. Understanding terminology is crucial in recognising racist behaviours and reflecting this in the organisations zero tolerance policy.</p> |
| <p>Public Statement</p> | <p>Another option of response is a public statement which externally reflects on the leadership commitment to anti-racism. This can be via a variety of mediums including a written statement, blog post, video etc. For example, see a written statement by St Albert’s Primary following racist comments directed towards ethnic minority children when photographed with the former First Minister. (See further resources for more examples)</p> <p>Learning from the Black Lives Matter movement shows that statements and rhetoric is not a tangible solution to racism (as evidenced by CRER). Therefore a holistic, anti-racist approach that includes a shift in organisational culture through policies, practices and by providing personal development opportunities is fundamental.</p> |
| <p>Police Reporting</p> | <p>It is important that certain online comments and hate crime are reported to the police. This forms part of a zero tolerance policy and should be done irrespective of whether the user is anonymous or not as the police can still track an IP address of where the harmful content was published from.</p> <p>In Scotland, there is support available through Police Scotland in tackling online hate crime.</p> <p>This is dependent on the UK Parliament Online Safety Bill as a reserved matter which seeks to increase accountability of social media platforms for the behaviours of their users and create a new duty of care for platforms.</p> |

Digital Zero Tolerance Policy

An organisation's online zero tolerance policy towards racism should be comprehensive and clear, outlining the guidelines and consequences related to racist behaviour in any digital context. Here are some key components that should be included:

1. **Statement of commitment:** Begin the policy with a strong and unequivocal statement that the organisation has zero tolerance for racism in any form, both offline and online. Emphasise the organisation's commitment to fostering an inclusive and respectful digital environment.
2. **Definition of racism:** Clearly define what constitutes racism, detailing that this includes explicit forms (e.g., racial slurs, hate speech) as well as implicit and subtle expressions of racism, including microaggressions.
3. **Scope of the policy:** Specify that the policy applies to all online platforms and digital communication channels where the organisation has a presence, including official websites, social media accounts, email communication, forums, etc.
4. **Unacceptable behaviour:** Provide specific categories of racist behaviour that are strictly prohibited, such as racial slurs, derogatory remarks, offensive memes or images, racially charged jokes, and discriminatory comments.
5. **Reporting mechanism:** Outline a clear process for reporting incidents of racism or related misconduct. Ensure that employees or users have an easy and confidential way to report such incidents to the appropriate authority within the organisation.
6. **Investigation process:** Describe how reported incidents will be investigated promptly and fairly, while respecting the privacy of those involved. Assign responsibility to a dedicated team or individual to handle these investigations.
7. **Consequences for violation:** Clearly state the consequences that individuals may face if they are found to have engaged in racist behaviour. These consequences should be proportionate to the severity of the offense and may range from warnings to disciplinary actions, up to termination of employment or account suspension. For members, this may be a permanent membership ban. Make it clear that this also includes police reporting for serious instances of racial abuse.
8. **Support and resources:** Ensure that individuals who experience or witness racist behaviour are aware of the support and resources available to them. This may include access to counselling, employee assistance programs, or diversity and inclusion training.
9. **Non-retaliation policy:** Make it explicit that individuals who report incidents of racism to the organisation will not face any negative consequences for doing so.
10. **Regular training:** Commit to providing ongoing education and training for all employees or users on the organisation's zero tolerance policy towards racism and the importance of maintaining an inclusive online environment.
11. **Monitoring and review:** Establish a system to monitor online platforms regularly for potential racist content or behaviour. Also, schedule periodic reviews of the policy's effectiveness and make updates as needed.
12. **External collaboration:** If appropriate, consider working with external organisations, experts or consultants to develop and implement the policy effectively.

By incorporating these elements, an organisation can develop a robust online zero tolerance policy towards racism that fosters a safe, respectful and inclusive digital space for all employees, members, stakeholders and service users.

Further resources:

[Public Statement following online racist remarks | St Alberts Primary School](#)

[Online Racist Abuse Statement | EIS](#)

[GTC Scotland statement following online abuse](#)

[Online abuse, a statement from our CEO, Becky Hewitt | Changing Faces](#)

[Impact of online abuse and harassment revealed in new research from the Victims' Commissioner](#)

[Online Racism | BBC Own It](#)

[Reporting hate crime | Police Scotland](#)

[Reporting a hate crime or hate incident to the police | Citizens Advice](#)

Environment sector specific further resources:

[Joint route map launched to boost ethnic diversity in the environment sector | Wildlife and Countryside Link](#)

[The RACE Report, 2022](#)

[Racism in the environment sector: why we must change and how we do it | Green Alliance](#)

[Confronting injustice: racism and the environmental emergency | Greenpeace](#)

References:

[Racism on social media: Why is abuse online so hard to stop? - BBC Newsround](#)

[Racism, Hate Speech, and Social Media: A Systematic Review and Critique - Ariadna Matamoros-Fernández, Johan Farkas, 2021 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

[Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding observations on the combined twenty-first to twenty-third periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#)

[Help & Information: Trolling | Bullies Out](#)

[Gendered online harassment of women journalists | Engender](#)

[The Ripple Effect: Covid-19 and the epidemic of online abuse | Glitch](#)

[Countering hate speech | UNESCO](#)

[Mental Health & Online White Supremacy: How to Cope \(verywellmind.com\)](#)

[Combating racism on social media: 5 key insights on bystander intervention | Brookings](#)