

Panellists stress need to criticise racist remarks

Panellists at a forum yesterday urged more people to call out inflammatory comments on social media, especially when they go overboard or touch on sensitive issues such as race.

The discussion, on the impact of social media on race relations, was organised by Roses of Peace, in partnership with the NUS Department of Communications and New Media, and The Straits Times. It was supported by OnePeople.sg, a national body that seeks to strengthen racial and religious harmony.

Issues raised included the extent to which measures must be taken against racist comments.

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More netizens urged to call out racist comments

Panellists at forum say letting such remarks go unchallenged would allow hatred to harden

Aw Cheng Wei

The silent majority can help douse the fire sparked by comments on social media, especially when the comments go overboard or touch on sensitive issues such as race.

Panellists at a forum yesterday, on the impact of social media on race relations, urged more people to call out racist comments online.

Letting such comments go unchallenged might lead to more people thinking that racism is allowed, or worse, allow hatred to be hardened into norms, said the panellists at the forum held at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

Adjunct Associate Professor Adrian Heng, a social media expert at NUS, said: "We aren't going to change the world overnight, but we can start looking at our own circles and take proactive steps."

He raised the recent example of how a video on Facebook, showing a resident of a condominium scolding a security officer for charging his guests a fee of \$10 for parking after 11pm, had sparked racist vitriol online. The saga had erupted over the Deepavali weekend.

Netizens called for the man, identified as Mr Erramalli Ramesh, to be sent away, on top of other hateful remarks.

Both security officer Steven Heng and Mr Erramalli had made police reports. The security officer had complained that he was harassed, while the resident claimed that he was a victim of doxing because his identity was disclosed online with the intention of harassment.

Mr Erramalli reportedly apologised to Mr Heng last Wednesday at a private meeting

where a security industry association leader was also present.

Prof Heng said that while the video was not racist, the same could not be said of the comments that identified the resident's race, and more should be done to stamp out such hateful race-calling.

"There weren't enough voices calling for calm," he added.

The call for netizens to urge equanimity online was backed by other panellists such as The Straits Times news editor Zakir Hussain, NUS undergraduate Shriya Rajesh and Mr Jimmy Sia, a regional head at tech company Grab and a volunteer with interfaith organisation Roses of Peace.

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One thing which the panellists and the attendees disagreed on was the extent to which measures must be taken against racist comments.

Suggestions included messaging comments directly to the posters of the content, inviting them to join in activities by associations that work with minorities, and having a reminder pop up before a comment is posted to tell users that what they want to say is about to go public.

Netizens could also respond to racist comments with a picture or video on racial harmony instead of text as a way to stop discussions from spiralling out of control.

Offline measures like making sure that people speak in English in front of others who may not understand Mandarin, Malay or

Tamil could also help make society more inclusive.

Mr Hussain said social media had changed the way people responded to racism, and it might be helpful to take a step back and think carefully before responding.

"We get triggered so much more often now," he said.

Mr Sia added: "We can't police behaviour online. You can't tell people to stop spewing nonsense."

Prof Heng said a successful outreach example was how the Young Sikh Association (YSA) had engaged Ms Sheena Phua, a beauty and travel content influencer, after she complained on Instagram that her view at the Singapore Grand Prix was blocked by two men wearing turbans.

Her comment went viral, and the YSA reached out to check if she was okay when online attacks got nasty and personal.

YSA president Sarabjeet Singh, who was at the forum yesterday, said that the association was unsure of what to do at first when the comments went live. But it eventually invited Ms Phua to an informal tour of the Central Sikh Temple so that she could learn more about Sikh traditions.

Mr Sarabjeet said that Ms Phua stayed on the tour for a good half of the afternoon. The issue is whether people are willing to spend the time to teach and for others to understand, he added.

But one of the attendees, nurse Nur Afqah Kamel, said during the question-and-answer session that the burden was disproportionately on minority races to make the majority race feel more comfortable.

The 26-year-old also wondered if the forum could have a more diverse range of panellists in terms of socio-economic status so that it might be more reflective of sentiments on the ground.

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(From left) Adjunct Associate Professor Adrian Heng; ST news editor Zakir Hussain; NUS undergraduate Shriya Rajesh; and Mr Jimmy Sia, a volunteer with interfaith organisation Roses of Peace, at the forum on the impact of social media on race relations. ST PHOTO: JEREMY KWAN

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