

Debate on whether online ‘safe spaces’ should be more open

How should society approach social media channels that serve as discursive “safe spaces” for minorities to talk about race, but also have the potential to divide?

This was a question academics tackled at a forum on race and racism yesterday, as some called for more involvement of other groups in such spaces, while others highlighted how their closed nature helps people feel safe.

At the discussion, the panellists were asked by Professor Paulin Straughan, a sociologist from Singapore Management University who was the moderator, about the polarity that such safe spaces can cause.

An online platform is considered a safe space when participants can speak freely and confidently of their experiences, without fear of discrimination, criticism or harassment.

Associate Professor Elmie Nemat, one of the four panellists, said the nature of social media is such that there are multiple pockets of safe spaces, given how people will

pick their own spaces to discuss various issues. Morally loaded issues like race and religion have “no right or wrong”, and hence there will be polarisation when people seek safe spaces to have discussions, he said.

Prof Elmie, deputy head of the Department of Communications and New Media at the National University of Singapore (NUS), suggested that such safe spaces go beyond social media and take place in real-life settings, to be more inclusive of people like seniors.

But sociologist Laavanya Kathiravelu, an assistant professor from Nanyang Technological University, said people who have experienced racism might feel it is important to have safe spaces closed in some way in order for them to articulate their experiences.

She said: “Even though these spaces might seem polarising, I think there is a space for them because people need their experiences validated, acknowledged. And I feel it is therapeutic, but it is also neces-

sary to find a community who validates your own experiences. So, we shouldn’t dismiss these spaces that are exclusive or self-selected completely, and say, no, we only want open spaces.”

Associate Professor Daniel Goh from the Department of Sociology at NUS held up pages on Instagram like @minorityvoices and @lepak-conversations that started out as safe spaces to talk about race, but have since opened up. Calling such a move courageous, he said opening up is important as it shows the majority that racist experiences are still happening and should not be forgotten.

The panellists also discussed the concept of “Chinese privilege”, which is adapted from the concept of “white privilege” used in the United States.

Prof Goh said discussions on privilege should start with experiences people face, be it in institutions or everyday life. He stressed that the question of privilege is important and has to be talked about, but cautioned against using blanket terms without context.

“To use it as a blanket term will be to revert to the same kind of racism and racialisation that we do not want, which is to say that, okay, 75 per cent of the population, you have privilege, you don’t realise it, you are complicit in racism. It puts everyone into a defensive posture, it cuts conversations off,” he said.

Hariz Baharudin