Should online 'safe spaces' that discuss race be more open or more closed?

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SINGAPORE - 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 that academics tackled at a forum on race and racism on Friday (June 25), as some called for more involvement of other groups in such spaces, while others highlighted how their closed nature helps people feel safe in them.

Organised by the Institute of Policy Studies and the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, the forum was live-streamed from the University Cultural Centre Theatre at the National University of Singapore in Kent Ridge.

At the discussion, the panellists were asked by moderator Paulin Straughan, a sociologist from the Singapore Management University, 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, with the expectation that everyone involved will listen and try to understand and without fear of discrimination, criticism or harassment.

Associate Professor Elmie Nekmat, 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 or controversial issues like gender equality and 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, who is deputy head of the Department of Communications and New Media at NUS, suggested that such safe spaces go beyond social media and take place in real-life settings to be more inclusive. The voices of the older generation are lacking in the social media space, and more could be done to include them, he said.

But sociologist Laavanya Kathiravelu, an assistant professor from Nanyang Technological University, said there is a need to acknowledge that 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.

"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's therapeutic, but it's also necessary to find a community who validates your own experiences," she said.

"So we shouldn't dismiss these spaces that are exclusive or self-selected completely, and say no we only want open spaces. I think we need both."

Associate Professor Daniel Goh from the Department of Sociology at NUS held up pages on Instagram like @minorityvoices and @lepakconversations that started out as safe spaces to talk about race, but have since opened up.

Calling such moves to expand their reach courageous, Prof Goh said opening up was important because it shows the majority that such racist experiences are still happening, and that the experiences should not be forgotten.

The panellists, who included Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao editor Goh Sin Teck, discussed the concept of "Chinese privilege" as well. The term is adapted from the concept of "white privilege" used in the United States, where privilege gives someone dominance in a society because of identity markers such as one's race or sex.

Prof Goh said discussions on privilege should start off 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 setting them into 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're complicit in racism'," he said.

"It puts everyone into a defensive posture, it cuts conversations off."