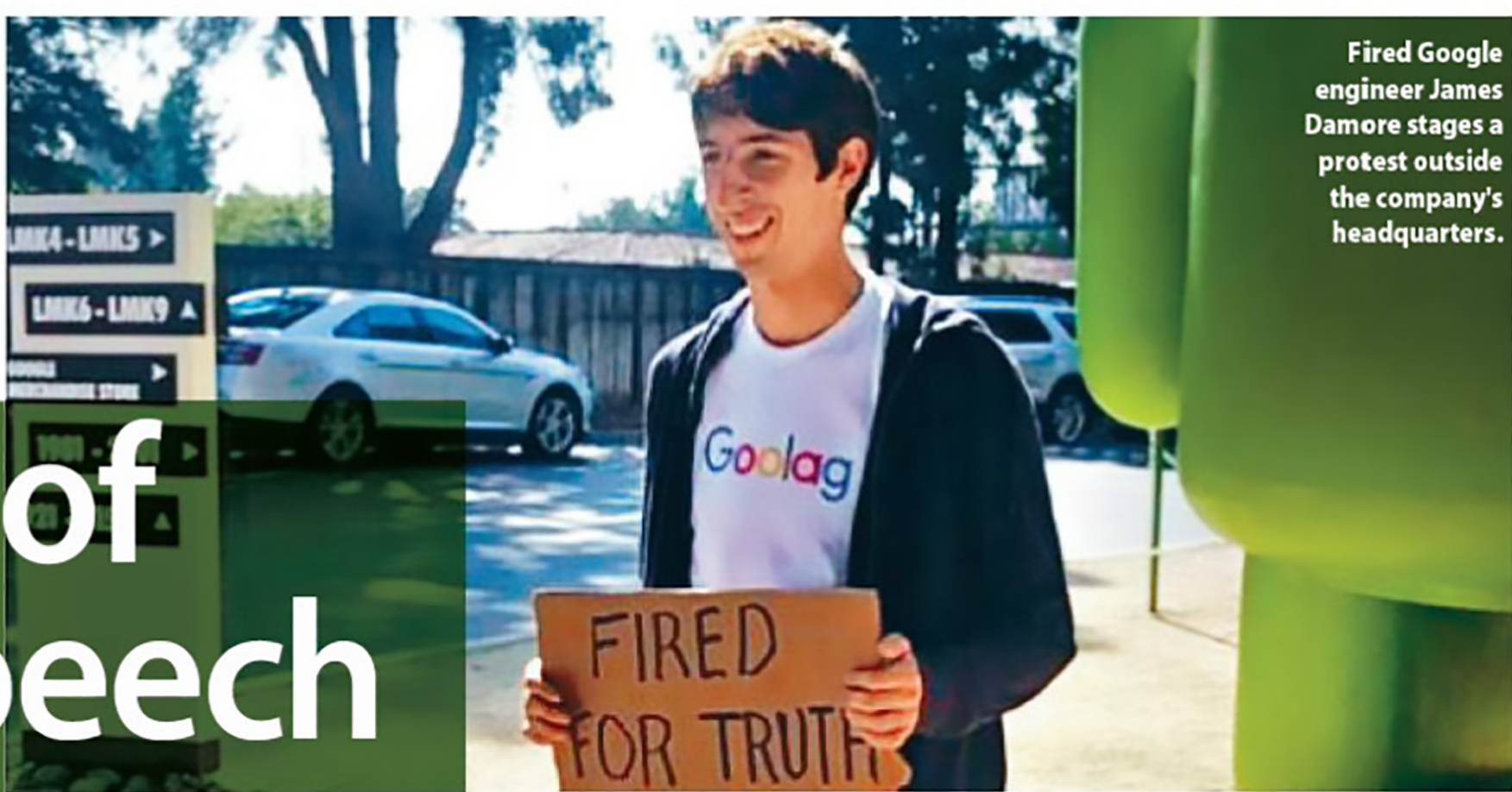


Fired Google engineer James Damore stages a protest outside the company's headquarters.

Limits of free speech



THE PRINCIPLE, VALUE and limits of free speech has been a hot topic in Hong Kong society recently, especially on university campuses. Opinions are split, emotions run high, and issues are highly politicized. For this reason, during my recent visit to Stanford University I was intrigued by and decided to attend a new event series called Cardinal Conversations (“cardinal” is the red Stanford color but also means “great importance”) specifically on the topic of free speech.

The Stanford president wanted to have “a series of discussions with well-known individuals who hold contrasting views on consequential subjects.”

Previous themes include: “Technology and Politics” (featuring Peter Thiel, founder of PayPal and Trump supporter), and “Real and Fake News” (featuring Ted Koppel, long time ABC news anchor). The one I attended was “When Free Expression and Inclusion Collides: A Dilemma of the Times” – featuring John Etchemendy (Stanford’s former provost), Claude Steele (Stanford’s former Education School dean) and Danielle Brown (Google’s Diversity VP).

For those not familiar with US politics, “inclusion” here refers to representation of under-represented minorities in the workplace – including universities.

There is a growing tension because while US society has been more inclusive over the last few decades (eg affirmative action programs in employment and college admission, corporate policies to include more female leaders), more recently there has been a more vocal and proactive opposition speaking out against inclusion when they are viewed as discriminatory against the majority. The topic is very timely.



It is interesting that the panelists held quite different views. Etchemendy is an advocate of absolute free speech – that universities are places for open discussion, especially on controversial (and often uncomfortable) topics, and that students should be exposed to these views in order to develop critical thinking, the essence of a university education.

Steele, who is African American, would not support free speech when they are “incredibly disruptive” to some segment of society and “can be debilitating enough” to “affect their performance, even the decisions they make about the courses of their lives.”

Brown said that free speech and inclusion are both important for Google, “but we also have a business to run. We need to think of which conversations are productive.”

The question-and-answer session was very interesting. The organizers utilized a web-based live audience interaction software called Slido, which allows the audience to pose live questions online, as well as to vote on which ones they’d like the panelists to answer.

Even though the panelists were able to answer only five to six questions, I could see all the

questions that were posted and which ones had the higher votes. That was as interesting as the answers themselves.

One of the most often asked (and voted) questions was on the James Damore memo at Google from 2017.

Damore, then an engineer at Google, sent the memo to all Google staff, stating his view in opposition to recent company initiatives on inclusiveness, asserting that those are discriminatory to men and Caucasians, and that women are biologically different from men and have different strengths and weaknesses in work. He cited statistics, quoted research literature to make his case, and suggested ways to promote inclusiveness without being discriminatory.

The memo created a huge uproar in social media and Damore was fired soon after. He has filed law suits against Google, claiming his right to free speech has been suppressed. Google’s public statement is that Damore’s memo created a hostile working environment at Google and that he was fired for violating the company’s code of conduct. It turns out that the First Amendment of the US Constitution only limits the government’s ability to suppress free speech but not employers’. The Harvard-Harris poll had 55 percent against Google (61 percent of Republicans and 50 percent of Democrats). Clearly, this issue is very divisive.

For Hong Kong, inclusion has not been as controversial a topic as political ones emanating from one’s interpretation of one country, two systems. Will there be an analogous Hong Kong conversation on “Free Speech versus Basic Law and National Sovereignty”? Who would be good panelists? Will it be possible to have a civilized conversation on these controversial topics, like at Stanford?