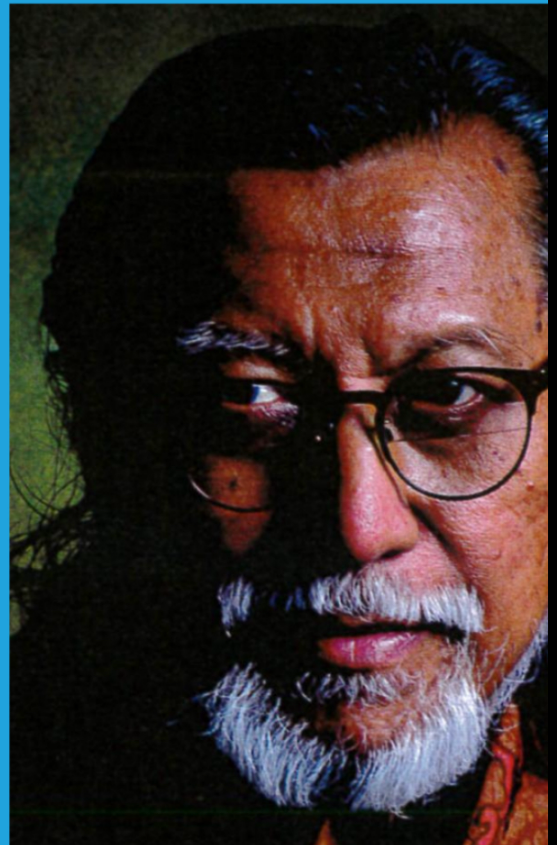




(Re)viewing Tanah Air

AHMAD MURAD MERICAN



Human Interest, Journalism, uitm

UiTM Communication School
Merger, Press Freedom &
Expression: Not Merely Academic

By Ahmad Murad Merican While Tan Sri Johan Jaaffar calls on improving Malaysia's position in the global press freedom index, the fate of one of the earliest and largest journalism schools in the country is in the balance. The Journalism Laureate also suggested a 'press freedom fund' – none of the news media organisations and portals...

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January 4, 2023 11 minutes

By Ahmad Murad Merican

While Tan Sri Johan Jaaffar calls on improving Malaysia's position in the global press freedom index, the fate of one of the earliest and largest journalism schools in the country is in the balance. The Journalism Laureate also suggested a 'press freedom fund' – none of the news media organisations and portals literally picked that up. For the media to continue to be the "voice, eyes and ears" of the people, funds are needed by news portals.

A press freedom fund. I heard it loud and clear. I was sitting right next to the chair that he stood on to launch the apakhabartv.com portal on Friday, Dec 31, last year. We were literally looking up to the man.

One indicator of press freedom in any nation is the existence (and vibrancy) of its journalism schools. This cannot be said of in Malaysia.

In October of last year, Universiti Teknologi MARA announced a merging of three faculties, placing together communication and media studies, information management and computer science under an administrative set up – involving three faculties. The merger came to be called the College of Computing, Informatics and Media. And a visit to the university's

AUTHOR

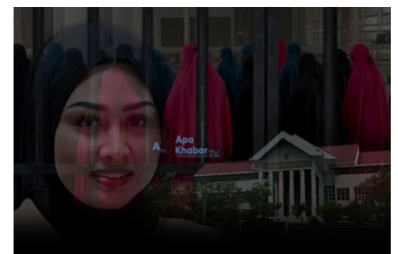


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website finds that the study of journalism, communication and media is placed under the cluster area of science and technology. And not social sciences and humanities.

In other words, the programmes from the communication and media faculty are now embraced under science and technology. I am no more with the university. I left UiTM in 2008 after 22 years in the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, seven years of which was in an institute I co-founded, the Institute of Knowledge Advancement (InKA). My last seven years with UiTM was spent at InKA.

I am still in the world of the university. The academia is where I reside, working on what is popularly described as 'academic matters' – and said to be 'removed from the real world.'

Things are not as simple as that. What is the real world by the way? The industry? The market? Society? And how would this 'academic' world impact the 'real world?' In the universities, I dabble into many things. There is the poetic licence to comment on ideas, episodes and things. And I have been doing this during my ITM days in the late 1970s to my Minnesota days in the mid-1980s. I used the media, to be precise journalism and more precise, the newspapers. I am talking about campus newspapers.



Human Interest, Ramadan, Religion, Selatan Thailand

[Bahasa Melayu/ภาษาไทย]
Kami jaga hati banduan Penjara Pusat Narathiwat สภากิจจิตใจและความรู้สึกของนักโทษทางเรือนจำจังหวัดนราธิวาสให้การดูแลอยู่เสมอ

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In ITM from the late 1970s, it was *Dimensi* (I was the first Bahasa Melayu managing editor). *Dimensi* was monthly. In Minnesota, it was *Minnesota Daily*, then with a daily circulation of some 20,000 copies, paid by advertisements. The Daily has a full-time editor, paid US\$2000 per month. That was in the mid-1980s. The hardcopy was placed at strategic locations on campus. The Twin Cities campus has a student population of some 30,000. I wrote opinion pieces. And one essay was not published because it was favourable to the Whites. So much for press freedom.

With the merger, journalism studies – and the campus newspaper is now unheard of, uncelebrated, would be pushed to oblivion; and communication scholarship misdirected. I have to intervene and comment as a concerned citizen; and as an academic in the university environment, not out of nostalgia; but out of a social responsibility to ensure what is professed is appropriately curated and advocated. There is a corpus to any profession. And contrary to popular sentiment, knowledge production in journalism and communication, just like any social sciences, go a long way. But they would say there's a mismatch between what is taught on campus and the professions. Long standing issue since I was a student at ITM.

Or no issue. But will elaborate this in a later piece. The university gave a host of reasons. The mantra sounds like to meet industry standards, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0), and the sharing of resources (perhaps space and funding). Another is to expose students with knowledge of computer science and information technology. And if IR4.0 is mentioned, why not cite Society 5.0? That is a more progressive vision of man and the world, much more relevant to those who produce content.

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What is clear, the merger is cosmetics. Without prejudice, we have not heard any initiative to produce new knowledge/new fields/new programmes/new degrees. We have not encountered any reorientation or reorientation of values and attitudes toward the corpus, field and discipline. We would also expect producing students and graduates to be placed in global media organisations. What is the innovation? The discourse from the university is mute.

And I am quite sure, there was no initiative and planning to revamp the curriculum, revise the syllabus/course outlines, revisit readings and text, creating new courses and programmes in line with the merger. There is an absence of intellectual energy and scholarship to that effect.

There is no epistemological attempt to restructure theories. The quintessential thinking should be the advancement of scholarship. After all, this is a university. Regardless of the discipline or area, what is produced is still an academic degree.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the School of Mass Communication then has an ASEAN Internship programme. I remember three from my batch of 1978-81 had gotten placements in Bangkok (*The Bangkok Post*), Jakarta (*Sinar Harapan*) and I in Manila (*The Philippine Journal* and *Inquirer*).

And numerous graduates from the faculty had successfully led media organisations, instrumental in configuring on the national media, social and political landscape of the country. Some spent their career (and led) in international media organisations. We see them in the journalism, advertising, broadcasting and public relations and publishing professions.

One has served Reuters in London in the 1990s and 2000. Another was CEO of a Paris-based multinational. And many are holding leading positions in Fortune 500 companies like PETRONAS and Shell. And not to speak of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

There is much that should be reviewed and reconsidered by the university. This is a software problem. An intellectual one. If we are talking about shared resources in courses, back in the 1970s and 1980s we have electives offered by other faculties. Students from Mass Communication and Library Science were happily attending courses offered by the Business and Law schools. No problem.

For more than 30 years, communication and media studies at UiTM saw the emphasis on the social sciences and the humanities – the Liberal Arts, as the component was called. And as a reminder, these were introduced by Tun Arshad Ayub, the intellectual father of journalism and communication at ITM. I am sure he would frown on the latest development. Arshad had a 50-year vision of ITM graduates, including those of *Kajian Sebaran Am*. And before he moved on, I had a conversation with Arshad on his vision for another 50 years. I do not see that addressed, if at all, in the merger.

Then we had Sociology, Literature (English and Bahasa Melayu works), Logic, International Relations, History and Asian Politics. V.S. Naipaul's prose left an impact on me. These comprised some 50 percent of the curriculum. These courses, nurturing values on society and humanity, are not emphasised anymore. In short, not the list of offerings. The obsession seems to be skills and technology. And even so, I doubt if there are subjects on the sociology, history or politics of technology on campus.

What is the progressive value in the merger? That's not the future. There is no emphasis on engaging student with giant communication and media organisations like Twitter, Google and Facebook; or Instagram and Tik Tok. I doubt if the whole exercise even thought of Tesla, apart from aligning the name to Elon Musk. Or Apple in linking Steve Jobs as a 'technologist' and 'innovator.' If we are so skewed to computers, and information and technology, there will be a critical lacuna in values, ethics and perspective.

The merger unfortunately is blind to values and ethos; society and humanity; history and the narrative. The power of storytelling is inadvertently lost. To delve into the future of communication, one has to deal with discourses on transhumanism and posthumanism. Are Bostrom, Fukuyama, Habermas, Harari and Kurzweil in the merger's orientation and intellectual climate?

From School to Faculty – the latter reflecting the late 1990's excitement of replacing 'Institut' with 'University.' And now it is the college nomenclature. If the university insists on resuming that arrangement, it would be for the best interest of society and nation to transform the faculty to College of Communication and Media Studies. I am concerned that the 'stand alone' (as faculty) sentiment implies a disadvantage position. The field may be marginalised. By implication of what could be imagined, press freedom, speech and expression be marginalised.

Discourse and scholarship over the last four to five decades have forecasted communication as be the core of the social sciences; or the emergence of a tripartite social science with Economics, Political Science and Communication as the determinants of the discipline. The scenario reflects the formation of trans and post-disciplinary epistemes. Are these factored in the merging? Are these deliberated by the all consummate university administrators, academics, professors and the senate?

A counter proposal to the merger is the College of Communication and Media Studies. This is far from the ideal. A radical move for any university is to have only one bachelor's degree – either a BA or a B.Sc. Call it utopian. But this is convergence of knowledge. Any university worth its salt must be ready to think about this. This would exclude degrees the professional disciplines – for example medicine or engineering. I have argued elsewhere for a social science and humanities component be structured in the medical curriculum.

I would imagine the proposed College be transdisciplinary, substantively weaving together academic disciplines, fields and themes for the purpose of advancing society and humanity.

The following is the administrative and academic structure under the College of Communication and Media Studies:

School of Journalism

School of Advertising, Marketing and Branding

School of Broadcasting

School of Public Relations

School of New Media and Publishing

School of Visual Communication

School of Communication and Futures Studies

School of Film, Animation and Drama

School of Social Science and Humanities

Under the College, there would be institutes/centres catering for specific areas and programmes. One example would be the Institute of Journalism, to cater for post graduate studies and research, strengthened by a Chair. For example, the A. Samad Ismail Chair of Malay Journalism.

Nothing nostalgic about Malay journalism. But seen from the contemporary perspective, delving into Malay journalism and newspapers, its history, the complex lives and thought of early journalists, are extremely strategic for nation and society. The College would be headed by a dean, also schools by directors. The same goes for institutes/centres.

Being futuristic does not mean that we do away with historical studies on communication and media. After 50 years, it would be welcoming this initiative were to include not one, but several professorial chairs – not necessarily reflecting the ‘sequence’ nomenclature. The alumni must move ahead, transcending territorial boundaries of fields and profession. This is not about the ‘budak mass comm’ sentiment; nor the narcissism of seeing ourselves in the image of the past. The discourse on trans and posthumanism in relation to media and communication is easily melting border. We are living in a fluid society.

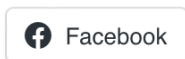
There must be a serious commitment. The future of the field of communication and media would be engaged with ethics and artificial intelligence (AI), bioethics and human dignity.

Granted it is man-machine interaction. Ultimately it is about behaviour and the imagination, the prose and the essay, the image, and the politics of human psyche, freedom and consciousness.

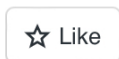
AI is being debated as a tool for imperialism and colonisation. AI is ethnocentric. It caters for White superiority. And this affects the media professions, including news selection, storytelling, the production of content and the creation of image. The necessary 'funding for communication' is critical for freedom – social, cultural and political expression. These are the challenges to scholarship and society. Not merely academic.

Dr Ahmad Murad Merican, essayist and artist, is professor of social and intellectual history, international institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, International Islamic University Malaysia.

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