

## THE PAST AND COMING COMMUNICATION JOURNEY IN MALAYSIA

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### **Abstract**

The paper recorded the tremendous changes in the academic and media landscape in tracing the development of communication studies since its beginning in 1971. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was the first to offer the communication programme followed by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and the other public universities. USM and UiTM benefitted from the American experts in the preparation of their academic programmes. The early communication programmes in public universities were American oriented due to the presence of the local lecturers whose early post graduate training was from American universities. This paper traced the turnover of academic staff in “generational order” to record such changes had on the development of the programme. The first generation of lecturers in the communication programmes has been taken over by the third and fourth generation compared to the new universities that only recorded the first generation of lecturers. The paper then discussed the challenges faced by the communication programmes in public universities such as the growth of the communication programmes in private universities, the lack of academic staff, and the adoption of the new media technology.

**Keywords:** *Communication; history; university; academic; media landscape*

## SEJARAH DAN MASA DEPAN PERJALANAN KOMUNIKASI DI MALAYSIA

### **Abstrak**

Kertas ini mencatatkan perkembangan kajian komunikasi dari segi perubahan landskap media dan akademik semenjak program komunikasi diperkenalkan di Malaysia pada tahun 1971. Universiti yang pertama menawarkan kursus dalam bidang komunikasi ialah Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), diikuti dengan penawaran oleh Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) dan universiti-universiti awam lain. USM dan UiTM mendapat faedah hasil sumbangan idea daripada sarjana Amerika. Program komunikasi pada peringkat awal banyak terpengaruh dari Amerika Syarikat kerana ramai sarjana Malaysia mendapat ijazah lanjutan dari sana. Kertas ini melihat perkembangan program akademik selari dengan peralihan generasi tenaga pengajar. Generasi pertama tenaga pengajar di program komunikasi telah pun bersara dan tempat mereka telah diambil alih oleh generasi ketiga atau keempat. Walau bagaimanapun program komunikasi yang baru diwujudkan, masih bersama dengan generasi tenaga pengajar pertama atau kedua. Kertas ini seterusnya membincangkan cabaran yang dihadapi oleh program komunikasi di universiti awam seperti perkembangan dari universiti swasta, kekurangan tenaga pengajar dan penerimaan teknologi media baru.

***Kata kunci:*** komunikasi; sejarah; university; akademik; lanskap media

### **INTRODUCTION**

Communication studies in Malaysia have come a long way since the first course was offered nearly 43 years ago. Since then many pioneers in the field have left for better pastures or to find peace of mind in retirement. The second and third generations of lecturers are taking over the leadership to continue the journey. What journey of the past do we see and what journey of the future do we envisage for communication education and studies in Malaysia? This paper will offer some insights and propose the challenges that we face in the future. It is a journey from the past to the future.

The first generation of the early communication departments has left the scene to be succeeded by the second generation who are the students of the first batch. This group again is leaving their footprints in the communication field as they

make their exits to be taken over by the third generation of lecturers. There will be differences in this chronological set up. The first batch of communication departments will now be assumed by leaders of the third or the fourth generations, but the younger departments in the other universities will still be with the second generation and the most recent universities are still with the first generation of lecturers.

I will look into the chronological set-up, citing names where the memory can capture them, or getting names as others can provide, and then later I will match the names with the kinds of activities they do and see whether we can learn something of benefit with the objective of this MENTION 2013

## **THE FIRST CHRONOLOGICAL TIER DEPARTMENTS**

The first course in communication at the tertiary level in Malaysia was offered to Universiti Malaya, but the then Vice-Chancellor turned it down on the premise that communication was a skilled course and hence not appropriate to be taught at the university level. Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang (then known as Universiti Pulau Pinang) took up the challenge and placed the communication programme in 1970 under the School of Humanities.

The Communication programme started off with two full-time and four part-time staff members. The first post-graduate programme began in 1993 with the registration of three students. In USM, Professor John Lent, and Leslie Sargent have also left to be in the United States, although Lent has been seen in USM and Malaysia for several visits since then. The first batch of Malaysian lecturers, Vincent Lowe, and Karthigessu have since left the scene. (External assessors to the School included Tony Wilson, Majid Tahrani, Herbert Schiller, James Curren). I am sure John Lent must be proud of the tremendous achievements of the Communication programme that he had helped initiate.

The second generation of lecturers to take the leadership were Ramli Mohamad, who became the first Dean with the setting up of the School of Communication Studies. Ramli and Khor Yoke Lin have retired this year, while Mansor Ahmad, Hamima Dona Mustafa, Mat Nayan and Harun Awang retired several years ago. Mohd Zin Nordin, another student who succeeded Ramly (who had moved to be the Dean of Post Graduate Studies) became the second Dean, to be succeeded later by Adnan Hussein. The deputy dean was Mohamad Mohd Yusoff, who earlier had served in UKM. Adnan Hussein and the present dean Jamilah Ahmad could be classified as the third generation of lecturers.

The second IPTA to offer communication was the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies at the University of Technology MARA, Malaysia (UiTM) that began in July 1972, by offering three sequences: journalism, public relations and advertising. Its name then was *Kajian Sebaran Am* (Mass Communication studies). The School started its post-graduate programme in July 1996 with 16 Malaysians as registered students.

ITM's Bebe Chooi, Marina Merican, Sharifah Mariam Syed Mansor, Shareen

Kamaluddin and Hamidah Karim, the first generation of lecturers have left academia. Sharifah Mariam is at home looking after the grandchildren, while Shareen Kamaluddin and Hamidah Kareem are in private consultancy (and earning more than lecturers). Bukhory Ismail and Sankaran R. have also retired.

The first generation of lecturers with the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies has given way to the fourth generation of leadership now led by Azizul Halim Yahaya. The first batch of students to take over the leadership was Mohd Hamdan Adnan (and Badaruddin Aziz.). Some of the names in the third generation of lecturers could possibly include Ahmad Murad Merican, Kiranjit Kaur and Adnan Hashim. (Mohd Hamdan Adnan is now with the Department of Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sabah as well as dean of the Faculty of Social Science.)

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was the third university to offer a communication programme in 1975 with four sequences: Advertising, Public Relations, Development Communication and Journalism. The first intake of a post-graduate student was in 1986. In 1996, there were 19 registered Masters students and two at the doctoral programme level.

Mansoor Ahmad and Farizah Jaafar joined Syed Arabi Idid in 1976 (Farizah in 1975) to contribute their very worth. Freeze is still in academia as a lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature, IIUM. Mansoor Ahmad, the person who started *Nadi Bangi*, is now on voluntary work. An early comer was Asiah Sarji, who was sent to do her masters in Syracuse University and also Wan Firuz who was sent to do his masters in Wisconsin in 1976. Both returned to be lecturers in the department. Mohamad Mohd Yusof came later to be in charge of advertising courses.

Rahmah Hashim, Samsudin A Rahim, Dhari Othman, Umi Thevi Manickam, Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri, Mohd Fauzi Abdul Rahman, Mohd Yusoff Abdullah, Raja Ahmad Alauddin, Mohd Helmi Abd. Rahim were students of the first or the first few batches recruited to be sent overseas to do their post-graduate training. (Not students of the Department but those who joined the department were Mazni Buyong, Mohd Safar Hasim, Faridah Ibrahim, Latiffah Pawanteh and Meor Zailan Meor Sulaiman).

The third generation of lecturers is characterized by the present leadership of Normah Mustaffa. A Department of Communication at the then Universiti Pertanian Malaysia initially offered courses for diploma level courses and later at the post-graduate level under the Centre for Education and Extension Studies. When the Extension was closed down, the Department of Communication moved to be a department in the Faculty of Ecology from 1997 to 1999 when it finally merged with the Faculty of Modern Languages as the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication. When it functioned as a full-fledged department it offered courses in Human Communication and Public Relations while individual courses include journalism, broadcasting and corporate communication.

Unlike the other institutions, UPM's Department of Communication offered courses at the postgraduate level. In July 1996 it had 20 masters candidates and nine PhD students. In UPM, Yusoff Hussein, among the early lecturers to start the Department of Communication, has also retired from active duty. Sulaiman Yassin is still with UPM as a distinguished Fellow. The first generation of lecturers at the Department with Yusoff Hussein were Mohd. Fadzilah Kamsah, Md. Salleh Hassan, Saodah Wok and Narimah Ismail. Musa Hassan, who was once head, was the second generation while the present lecturers of Ezhar Tamam, Rosli Selamat and Zulhamri Abdullah are the third generation of lecturers.

Sharifah Mariam Syed Mansor a first generation lecturer in UiTM, later headed the Department of Communication in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). When she left two years later, the post was taken over by Shawaluddin Anis, another first generation lecturer from USM, to be asked to head a communication department. We therefore see two first generation lecturers, starting departments in other universities, Yusoff Hussein initiated the Department of Communication at the International Islamic University Malaysia in 1991 and Sharifah Mariam headed the Communication program in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.

Universiti Malaya had a change of mind when it decided to set up a programme in journalism in 1976 called the Creative and Descriptive Writing Programme placed under the Malay Studies Department. In 1987 it changed its name to Department of Writing with a full department status. In the 1993/1994 session, the name was changed to the Department of Media Studies, to be headed by Associate Professor Abdullah Tahir till 1997. He was succeeded by Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar (1997-2000); Azizah Hamzah (2000-2003), Rahman Shaari (2004-2005), Abu Bakar Abd Hamid (2005-2006); Md. Sidin Ahmad Ishak (2006-2007). The present head is Azizah Hamzah. The Department of Media Studies offers four major programmes:

- Communication and Journalism
- Broadcasting and Film
- Publication and Multimedia
- Creative Writing and Professional Writing

## **THE SECOND CHRONOLOGICAL TIER**

Two events characterized the setting up of communication departments in Malaysia after 1990. The amendments made to the University and University Colleges Act, 1971 made it possible for the setting up of private universities. Departments of Communication were established in private universities such as Taylor University College that later developed as Taylor University. The second characteristic was the setting up of more departments and faculties of communication in public universities leading to what would possibly be Malaysian communication models.

The School of Communication at Taylor University was established in 2000. The school offers various programmes such as Foundation in Communication,

Diploma in Communication, Bachelor of Mass Communication (Hons) Advertising, Bachelor of Mass Communication (Hons) Broadcasting, Bachelor of Mass Communication (Hons) Public Relations, Bachelor of Mass Communication (Hons) Public Relations and Event Management, Bachelor of Mass Communication (Hons) Public Relations and Marketing, and Master in Communication.

It is a different programme at Monash University that started in 2002. The Communication programme is offered through the School of Arts and Social Sciences at the Monash University, Malaysia Campus. The degree awarded by the School is the Bachelor of Arts (majors in psychology, international studies, communication, journalism and writing), Bachelor of Arts (Global) and Bachelor of Communication.

Recently accredited was the Communication programme at Lim KokWing University of Creative Technology. The Faculty of Communication, Media and Broadcasting, LimKokWing University of Creative Technology offers the following degrees:

- Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Professional Communication (Accredited on 15/05/2008)
- Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Digital Film and Television (Accredited on 10/08/2010)
- Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Event Management (Accredited on 25/06/2010)
- Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Broadcasting and Journalism (Accredited on 26/01/2011)
- Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Digital Media (No record on accreditation)

## **THE ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES**

The communication programmes in Malaysia are basically based on the American model, with several premises held by the early founders. USM and UiTM communication programmes were greatly assisted by American scholars, the former from John Lent and perhaps funding assistance from the World Bank and the latter received assistance from Ohio University. Dean Wilhelm from Ohio University and later Bernard Rubin were instrumental in providing a sense of direction in the curriculum at UiTM and also offered places for several of the academics to further their studies in the American campus (Sharifah Mariam, Hamidah Karim and Marina Samad). It was a strategy on the part of UiTM then to link up with Ohio University to gain recognition and also to get academic help in running its programme, the credit for this idea should be given to Tan Sri Arshad Ayub, then Director of ITM. Others like Mohd. Hamdan Adnan, Shareen Kamaluddin graduated from Boston University, United States.

The Communication Programme at USM was given an early boost with John Lent heading the programme. Lent is a well-known scholar who injected both the need to teach and to do research. Vincent Lowe, an early staff, got his PhD training from The Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Another early lecturer

was Karthigesu.

The Communication Programmes in UKM and UPM were developed by the locals but with the programmes orientation psychologically affected by the pioneers' early training. Syed Arabi Iddid and Yusoff Hussein were graduates of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. So was Mohd. Fazilah Kamsah and Saodah Wok. The other pioneers in UKM were Mansoor Ahmad, who got his Masters from Boston University and Farizah Jaafar from Ohio University.

The pioneers in UPM had a different first degree background. Yusoff Hussein, Fazilah Kamsah and Saodah Wok held degrees in Agriculture and obtained their PhDs from the University of Wisconsin in Mass Communication.

The early communication scholars received their education, wholly or partly from universities in the United States or Britain. Very few scholars like Asiah Sarji and Mohd Safar Hasim received their PhDs from Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) but their masters were from American universities. It was only in later years that more scholars were sent to be educated in British universities (and much later to Universities in Australia). The orientation of those coming back from an American education was much different from those who were British trained. It is generally to be expected that when more graduate programmes mature in Malaysia more lecturers would receive their PhDs from Malaysian universities rather than from abroad.

Given the limited and short history, what do we make of the Communication programmes in Malaysia? We can look at it in teaching, research and the direction of the programme that came into being and analyze their direction. We see two developments: One a different set up of new communication departments and, two, the upscaling of the first generation of communication departments.

Nearly all the communication programmes (either as a unit, department or faculty) have emphasized teaching, but it is in the nature of the emphasis that is noted. Some have emphasized on journalism, others in broadcasting while others in public relations. In the early days, developmental communication was sought after, as evident in USM, ITM, UKM and UPM. The main reason why communication was approved by the Ministry of Education for UPM was the need for a developmental type of communication. Hence, the communication unit was placed under the Centre for Education and Extension Studies to provide communication skills and know how to extension agents and farmers. Even communication departments/units in UiTM, USM and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia had an orientation in developmental communication. It was only in later years that developmental communication was not offered anymore. New communication departments in the 1980s minimized offering courses in developmental communication.

Communication development was the in-thing among the more established universities in the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of the powerful effects of media was held in high esteem. Schramm nurtured the idea of media being a great teacher able to impart knowledge and education to the

masses thus beginning, perhaps, the early model of A sending message to B (the audience). It is something that someone does to someone else. It is A the communicator providing the mass messages (education bits, the development directly to the farmers) that was the hallmark of the early assumption of the might of the media. It is the era of the Magic Bullet Theory, the powerfulness of the media and the passive audience.

UNESCO was also concerned with the communication structure and had the media index to correlate with the development level. The higher the presence of the newspapers, radio and movies would mark the higher the level of development of one particular country. Hence the concern that UNESCO made on the respective governments to develop their media infrastructure.

Communication as a tool for development was seen by the early planners able to quickly impart innovative ideas to the farmers and the extension agents. The University of Philippines in Southeast Asia was the pioneer in development communication as much as other centres in Latin America and Africa. It was the mighty media blazing its trials in so many parts of the world.

In many ways the early communication programmes in Malaysia were shaped by this notion of the powerful effects of the media. Media were able to transfer knowledge and to affect behavioural changes to the general public. I remember the first research undertaken by the department of Communication UKM was on the Orang Asli (Mah Meri) of Pulau Carey (Rahmah Hashim and Farizah Jaafar were on the ground interviewing the respondents). Our aim was to find out the knowledge that these Orang Asli had of the contemporary political leaders on the assumption that they were exposed to the mass media. We found that they were not exposed and they were not aware of the political leaders. It later occurred to us as to why they must be interested in the main political leaders when their lives were peripheral to the mainstream politics. We thought the issues of daily necessities would be a better choice of questioning them. Why must they be concerned? So much for the effects of the media.

Exposure to the media and the implicit gaining of knowledge from the media was also seen in the research done by UPM, UKM and USM. The study by Leslie Sargent (1976) on behalf of UNESCO on the communication structure in Malaysia conducted while he was a lecturer with the Communication programme in USM was in one big sense a research in that direction. How much did media disseminate information on various government policies, did the Malaysian audience receive the message? Who listens, reads and watches what channel?

The holding of seminars in Malaysia then was also to reflect this. The School of Mass Communication in UiTM and the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) held a two day seminar in October 1978 on the role of the Mass Media and Socio-Economic Change. Media were seen to actively activate socio-economic changes.

Research done then was by today's standard simple and descriptive. But they laid the foundations that other lecturers were to build on in later years. One



must give credit to Leslie Sargent for his work on the Malaysian media and information structure that was conducted in 1976 was wrapped in administrative matters (recruitment of staff, balancing between student intake and teaching; fulfilling bureaucratic demands on rules and regulations, getting money for infrastructure, etc).

The second generation of communication schools in the public universities was taking a different approach from the first generation of communication departments/units. Not only was the first generation of communication schools moving away from the first orientation, the second generation of communication schools were veering toward a combination of sorts. The Department of Communication at the International Islamic University, set up in 1991, was to plan and nurture courses with an Islamic orientation designed to meet the needs of the Muslim world. The students were given courses that kept them informed of Western and Islamic knowledge. This Islamic orientation was later to be taken by the Communication Department at the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM).

The Communication courses at University Utara Malaysia in 1999 took on a more information technology orientation in line with the mission of the University as a primer Management School. The Department offered courses in information technology. As a logical development it became a School of Information Technology and Communication with its emphasis on information Technology.

The Department of Communication at Universiti Malaysia Sabah was supposed to be blended with the creative arts and it was within this direction that the department was approved. As the department was approved in Sarawak, it was sooner or later that a department of communication was approved at Universiti Malaysia Sabah.

The Communication Department in USM developed into a full- fledged faculty in 1995, while the programme at UPM was upgraded when it merged with the Faculty of Languages to be known as the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication. It is only in UKM that the Communication Department was reorganized to be a School of Media and Communication Studies within the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. The School offers three undergraduate programmes: Communication and Information Management, Media Communication and Communication and Public Policy. The name appears significant but it actually functions as a programme within a department.

On the whole, the impact of the communication programmes was very impressive on the political and administrative leaders of the country. The press, the public relations, the broadcasting, film, Information and the advertising industry gave their full cooperation to the communication departments. Communication departments pioneered in assigning students for practical attachment with media organizations much earlier than the other social science and humanities departments. Perhaps, at that period of time, these departments were of the opinion that practical training was too skilled oriented because

academic graduates only need their brains to get jobs. It is to the credit of the communication programmes that they received cooperation from media organizations and the Ministry of Information (and their respective departments of Information, Broadcasting and Film) during the practical training exercises.

If we were to analyze, the close rapport between the academic communication departments, the media industry, and the Ministry of Information, developed even as the departments of communication were initiated in the 1970s. It was not only in terms of the practical training, but their staff even took time out to talk and give lectures to our students. What was important was that our students were later to take up employment with the media and the government agencies and thus extended the rapport.

By the 1990s, matters began to settle down. USM's elevation of its Communication programme to a School status in 1995, UiTM's Mass Communication and Media Studies and the School of Media and Communication Studies, UKM and UPM's Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication in 1999 moved to a more permanent structure. More staff were coming home with better qualifications. Other departments in the university were accepting media and communication studies to be academic in nature and we also knew the limits of media in campaigns and government programmes.

The arrival of private universities on the scene brought in a new dimension to the communication programmes in Malaysia. Basically, the private universities (either Universities or University colleges) were offering courses in English while the public universities had to offer them in Malay. Public universities were more rigid in offering courses having to abide by the university and Ministry's regulations. Any change made to the curriculum had to be approved by the Faculty and also the Senate and, if need be, by the Ministry. The private universities were more flexible in affecting curriculum changes and were able to accept students more readily than the public universities. The course offerings by the Private universities were more market oriented compared to the courses offered by the Public Universities that were slow in heeding changes. The offerings by the Private Universities in terms of their degree programmes were reflective of the market demands. (see LimKokWing's Bachelor in Digital Media ).

The courses that the private universities were able to offer were a reflection of the courses taught at the main campuses outside the country. While public universities were concerned with the Malaysian identity of the courses this was secondary to the private universities. As long as textbooks were used in the United States or United Kingdom, it was approved for the reading list in Malaysia. Books and articles written by Malaysians were also encouraged among the departments in the public universities to provide a Malaysian perspective to the communication programmes. Hence the difference between the general orientation of the courses offered by public universities and the private institutions of higher learning.

## **ACADEMIC CONTENT**

While academic courses were approved by the Senate and the Ministry, the overall academic development of communication programmes could be given greater attention. We recall the setting up of a (COHECS) Committee headed by Dr. Faridah Ibrahim, then at the Department of Communication, to look at the overall development of communication studies in public universities in Malaysia. By the year 2000, the IPTAs felt the challenge posed by the private universities. Hence a report was prepared by the heads of communication departments in IPTAs in 2010 on the future direction of communication education in IPTAs. (Faridah Ibrahim, Mus Chairil Samani and Normah Mustaffa, 2010). Many recommendations were made, including the need to have a longer practical training, the more rapport with media organizations and the departments to be global in outlook. Perhaps another report should be prepared into the general orientation of the communication programmes in the IPTs for all scholars to have a wholesome appreciation of the communication education in Malaysia.

Several areas were not given due attention in the report, chief of them being the research undertaken and the general orientation of the curriculum. Many research projects were undertaken by the staff of IPTA. Grants were awarded by the Ministries, government agencies and private organizations to lecturers to conduct research in Malaysia (see Mohd Dhari Othman et al. (1991). But there are areas that the emphasis on research could be given, among the older departments, especially so with regard to the development of theoretical perspectives and a general explanation of communication events. All too often we remain descriptive. We are reminded by the statement made by Tunstall (1983) that (U.S) communication research suffers because of its “fragmentation.” (his reference that there was too much low quality work and very little of a really high quality output) or that there should be “more coherence” (Herbst, 2008). Another scholar, Thayer (1983) questioned the purpose of scholars conducting sponsored research, while others are free to promote their own academic interests. The former type of research becomes administrative and contributes little to knowledge, but enjoys an applied practical value while the latter enhances knowledge and develops a contribution that is so lacking in the discipline. Gans (1983) added that over the years there is a need to undertake research to develop our conceptual framework, and in so doing identify disagreements among our own researchers and be yet richer at the end of the day.

Research and held seminars were held to discuss findings. One such early seminar was called “Seminar Penyelidikan Komunikasi” 3-4 September 1991. There were discussions on the methodologies used, on the findings (Salleh Hassan, 1991), on the areas of research (Ahmad Murad Marican, 1991), on critical theory (Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri, 1991). One should read the seminar paper submitted by Md Salleh Hj Hassan on the research areas and the methodologies used by researchers (Bachelors theses, lecturer’s research) to know how extensive survey and content analysis were used and how development communication

then was in vogue. It was clear by then that some lecturers were specializing in some areas while others were changing their interests to suit their current tastes. But the findings in the Seminar and the findings in the later MENTION 2011 and also in MENTION 2013 (glancing through the programmes) provide little encouragement that serious work is being undertaken to develop conceptual framework or theoretical perspectives. Only about 10 percent of the papers went beyond describing events on the use of media or on the portrayal of personalities.

I had quoted passages from some American scholars like Thayer and Gans some years past when American scholars and mainly European scholars were discussing communication research and development which were then recorded in a special edition of the *Journal of Communication* entitled "Ferment in the Field." It was a serious discussion where exchanges were made from different research and ideological perspectives (critical, post-positivists, cultural studies) and the stand between interpersonal and mass communication. The discussion allowed greater understanding of the different perspectives.

Let us move on since the discussion was held in 1983 and reflect on the development of communication studies in Malaysia. We have acknowledged differences in theoretical perspectives (although some would not accept the differences) in conducting communication research and we do acknowledge that we have been conducting research although not that many or in depth than we should have. We have to acknowledge that among the social scientists in Malaysia, communication scholars constitute the biggest in number, and communication units, departments or faculties exist in nearly all the public universities and also in the private universities. The presence of communication scholars is acknowledged. Communication scholars are able to hold conferences once in every two years, alternatively organized by UUM and the other by UKM. There are journals in communication, one regularly published by UKM (*Jurnal Komunikasi*) and the others by USM, UiTM (*Forum Komunikasi*) and periodically by UUM and UM. We need to have frequent publications of communication journals and have in mind the need to internationalize our journals and boast to be the best in the region due to our research activities, strength in the number of staff, students and communication programmes.

Over the years, we see areas of focus that we should develop. As we look at the Seminar Penyelidikan 1991, MENTION 2011 and MENTION 2013, several focus areas seem to be highlighted, namely studies related to Elections/ Politics; Youth; Identity, Communication Networking, Framing, New Media (twitter, facebook, Youtube). Government Slogans/ Nation building ( 1Malaysia; Wawasan 2020), Islam. This is a big development from 1991, when the focus was then on Advertising, Journalism, Development Communication, Politics/ Election. By 2011 and 2013, the focus has grown bigger and wider although the methodologies are mainly survey, content analysis and qualitative. Future studies would go deeper into examining these issues.

Malaysian communication scholars are facing similar problems as faced by

other communication scholars. We need to keep building the field, and also have value-added ingredients. “we need more coherence and more legitimacy if we are to strengthen our field.” (Herbst, 2008 ; p. 603). The subcomponents of communication as well as the field itself was once noted for its isolation, insular and inward- looking, quoting research work from among communication scholars and from the familiar communication journals but today it has grown to catch the attention of scholars from other disciplines. The insularity of the communication field, its fragmentation and its inability to coalesce is a growing concern (Pfau, 2008).

Delia (1987) once described communication as a “debtor nation” that cited theories and research from other disciplines but this has not been the case anymore ( Byrant & Pribanic-Smith, 2010). Some of the communication theories have been accepted by other disciplines, for example Agenda Setting, Diffusion of Innovation, Spiral of Silence and the Third Person Effect, Uses and Gratifications. We have been using some of these theories, but not all of us are using theories or are conceptual in our research writings. Research using and evaluating theories is indeed significant for communication. “Asking fundamental “why” questions and constructing and evaluating theories that answer them are activities that are at the very heart of studying communication as a social science.” (Berger; Roloff and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2010: 17).

Md Salleh Hassan (2013) mentioned that there has been more qualitative research than before (1991) but the bulk is still quantitative. Scholars prefer quantitative research over qualitative but there is an appreciation of the value in both approaches. Murad Marican has also expressed his concern at the lack of theory building among communication scholars in Malaysia, although he sees the need for communication studies take a wider social science perspective, but hold in general agreement that communication field to be developed must be coherent (Coren, 2012; Herbst, 2008) not fragmented. The communication field has become prolific (Bryant & Pribanic-Smith, 2010) boasting at least 44 journals compared to only 13 journals in 1987. If you add other journals published in other countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Nigeria, then the number of journals in communication would be much more. Communication is a vibrant study of interest.

On the horizon lies another issue that should be our concern. Communication research and, in fact, communication education itself, is being affected by the development in technology. We have seen our scholars studying events and effects relating to the new / social media (blogging, YouTubes, twitters) and this was akin to what was done when the older scholars did their research on the new media then (Radio, Films, TV, Fax). But the difference is that the Information Technology Schools and scholars in engineering, business and sociology are also included these new media as part of their academic interest. Recall that in the 1970s and 1980s, our communication departments were relating to the Ministry of Information, but now we have to relate to the Ministry of Multimedia and

Communication, an expansion of the Ministry's functions that now include the new media. The inclusion of the new media in our curriculum and also in our research has brought and requires a new perspective to be taken. The concepts of audience, the sender and receiver of messages, the space of communication, time, the effects of media have been changed with the new media. The new media are also to be included in journalism, public relations and advertising, film.

Research on the new media will heavily challenge the research of communication and media researchers as new concepts are introduced and new conceptualization and measurements are required. There is, therefore, a ferment in the field. One prominent scholar warns of intense competition from sociologists in studying the new media should communication scholars fail to delve deeper into the significance of the new media on society. Pooley and Katz (2008) said that sociologists once abandoned mass communication research due to its vocational training appeal, but of late have shown a mild resurgence in research interests toward the new media.

Our journey has therefore just begun. There is a need for Malaysian scholars to do more research that is theoretical and conceptual, for scholars to reach the international arena and engage the international fraternity. If, in the early days, the journey had begun to stabilize the communication field, in the 1980s, we were moving toward a Malaysian model within the keen issue debated as the 'Ferment of the Field', it is envisaged that the coming journey in the 2010s will see scholars facing an engaging debate on "Ferment in the Field". This is our new journey.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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### ***Conversations***

Mohd Salleh Hassan, 14 Nov., 2013.

Taib Ariffin, 14 Nov., 2013

Mohamad Md. Yusoff, 8 Nov. 2013.

Rosli 10 Nov. 2013.

Rosli Selamat 14 Nov. 2013.

Yusoff Hussein, 13 Nov. and 18 Nov. 2013.

Faridah Ibrahim, 17 Nov. 2013.

Kiranjit Kaur, 25 Nov., 2013