Articles From The Year 2023 & 2024

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1. General

1.1. From Fans to Fanatics of Fandom - The World of Idols

Sinar Daily. 2024 Nov 10

A CELEBRITY may become an idol to his/her fan(s).

Some fans tend to idolise a celebrity at the level of worshiping a saint. Such a fan becomes a “devotee” who does not merely follow the idol's updates but also follows the idol's way of life. The performance and popularity of their idols sway their mood and happiness in daily life.

On the other hand, a celebrity idol is always under pressure to maintain or increase fame and fans. However, the number of fans and followers fathom the scale of the popularity of a celebrity. A celebrity idol then naturally remains frantic with fear and stress to lose the support and confidence of his/her fans.

This fan-idol dependency is not necessarily limited to the entertainment world, such as music and movies. It is equally true in politics, literature, fashion, or even a fictitious character in a novel.

From a fan to a fan club representing a group of fans of a celebrity evolves in a sub-culture (or cult?) - fandom - where the group of fans share a common interest and feeling of camaraderie for their celebrity. Generally speaking, a fandom grows and acts around any common area of a fan’s interest or activity.

A celebrity idol is no more than a human of flesh and blood - a reality that is often ignored or forgotten by their fans as well as by the entertainment industry. Yet, idols are held to impossible imaginary standards beyond human level. That expectation “forces” them either to abandon the life of a regular human or hide their dealings and affairs as a regular human behind the curtains.

While a fanatic fan dictates their way of life following the celebrity idol in their imaginary world, their formidable demands at times turn into “fan justice” dictating the fate of a celebrity. Along with public scrutiny, cyberbullying, and overwhelming expectations of the entertainment industry, fan justice took a heavy toll on the lives and careers of celebrity idols.

News of their dealings and affairs in the daily life of a celebrity that mismatch fandom’s expectations can turn into an inevitable fallout of the celebrity not only from the hall of fame but also from the entertainment industry. Being unable to cope with pressure of losing fans and fame - some celebrities hide themselves behind the screen, some go on self-exile from the entertainment industry, and a few commit suicide.

The disappearance of many celebrities from the entertainment world and a series of high-profile suicides of popular celebrities are the tragic endorsements of such fan justice.

Thus the fan justice in the fandom court brings an end to many celebrity idols for a reason that has nothing to do with their performance but for their life and living as a human of flesh and blood.

In fact, the necessity to abandon the regular way of human life to excel in the entertainment world is no more than an enigma. There are celebrity singers and actors who have their regular human life and yet have delivered the best of their performance.

At the same time, no matter how those celebrities are in their personal life, fans or the entertainment industry are unable to dictate them to shape their way of life.

Yet, the formidable fandom demands which forces a celebrity to abandon a regular way of life such as to remain single to become celebrity idols unnecessarily cutthroats their humane life. In the K-pop world that took a heavy toll on many young megastars.

For some celebrities, fan justice matters, while for others it does not.

The wild expectations of fans and fandoms must put an end to the unfair fan justice in the entertainment world. Both fandoms and entertainment culture need to carefully look at the dynamics of such fan justice.

1.2. Perceived “superiority” is counterproductive

Asia News Today. 2024 Nov 09

In any organisation or institution, leadership is bestowed at different layers from a superior (or greater) to an inferior (minor) authority. Keeping the order in the chain of command in authority is imperative for a successful leadership and success of the organisation.

Showing off an authoritative superiority is a natural instinct for some – if not for all. Hence it is not unlikely that a person tends to exercise power beyond the level of authority given to his/her position. This tendency is also common among those who are close to a superior leader or have one or another form of “control” over a superior leader.

A superior leader at times needs to rely on his/her office assistant or secretary or a peer to convey a command or an information to an inferior. At the same time, an inferior may prefer to be instructed without directly dealing with the superior. In certain circumstances, such mediated commands are convenient for both sides and work more efficiently.

However, a mediated command sometimes can create unnecessary confusion and conflict.

The conflict and confusion may arise because of a perceived “superiority” among those who are close to a superior leader or are entrusted with conveying the mediated command on behalf of the superior leader. Because of the perceived superiority, they start acting as a superior and often as a decisive (read dictating) authority. Such a perceived superiority at times engenders mistrust and doubts and proven counterproductive especially when it breaks the chain of command.

Anyone in an organization with a perceived superiority often forgets their actual territory of authority and also ignores the authority of others. They tend to interfere and influence leadership authorities of others in a superior, parallel, or inferior position.

Such an individual also subjectively treats others depending on their personal identity. In other words, anyone with a perceived superiority reads both the personal identity and authority of his/her peers to decide their level of acting “superior” over them. Their subjective dealings with others – as opposed to objective dealings in a professional premise – impel them to display different guises of obedience and subservience to different superior leaders.

An individual with perceived superiority also tends to control things beyond his/her actual authority and jurisdiction in the organisation. Thus attempt to show off his/her assiduity – which in fact is due to their self-imposed control over tasks beyond their actual authority and jurisdiction.

In summary, the existence of a perceived superiority in a chain of command cause conflict and confusion in an organisation in many ways: (1) imposing unnecessary and uncomfortable superiority over others, (2) showing insubordination to one or another superior, (3) creating an unhealthy working environment by imposing discriminating treatment towards different leaders having different personal identities, and (4) reducing output by controlling tasks more than they can handle.

All in all, perceived superiority by breaking the chain of command becomes counterproductive for an organisation. The most possible way to control anyone with perceived superiority is to remind them of their roles and tasks in clear terms by their superiors.

1.3. Controlling Greed - The brake pedal to corruption

Sinar Daily. 2024 Nov 09

INTEGRITY simply means being honest and doing the right thing even in the absence of anyone else. Some of us might appear to be honest because we do not have the opportunity to do something wrong. There are others who try to maintain honesty for a fear of losing fame or being reprimanded socially or legally. And there are some, who strive to remain honest for the fear of punishment or for a dream to be rewarded in the life hereafter.

Yet, there are others who do not care about integrity - simply because corruption brings “fortunes” for them. To them “benefits” of being corrupt outweigh the harms for themselves.

We know stories of parents stealing food for their starving children, or people relying on an illegal source of income for their survival or to treat their ailing loved ones. At the same time, we know stories of billion dollar corruption by those who are not in need of any necessities or luxury - they are simply kleptomaniacs.

A lack of integrity is often measured with the corruption index of an organisation or a nation. At its core, the corruption index of an organisation reflects the lack of integrity at an individual level. Hence, the issue of integrity is often addressed by preparing and training an individual to remain honest, by blocking any possible loopholes that otherwise would allow one to do wrong things, and by incorporating legal dictum and policy to punish anyone who is proven to be guilty of a lack of integrity.

All in all, integrity is a major issue in every sector of life both in public and private sectors - be it in business, academia, and administration.

For ages, the measures to curb corruption did not eliminate it. Perhaps, that history of the predicament of not being able to eliminate corruption throughout human civilization forced us not to dream of “zero” corruption while we have goals for zero hunger, zero poverty, and even zero carbon emission as the 2030 UN sustainable development goals! Nevertheless, we want to instil integrity in each of us to eliminate corruption.

Perhaps the starting point of addressing the goal of eliminating corruption lies in the answers to the question of why one loses integrity. A former President and CEO of Institut Integriti Malaysia (IIM) and former Director General of the Department of Integrity and National Governance (JITN), Datuk Dr. Anis Yusal Yosoff answered that question in a simple one word - greed. To Datuk Anis, greed makes one lose their integrity.

Albeit, wanting to have more than one need or wanting to live beyond one’s means can make one greedy - eventually losing their integrity or becoming corrupt. When greed is the cause of losing integrity - then controlling one’s greed would control corruption.

Looking candidly, we shall find ourselves in the competition of making wealth in this modern world. We have built a society where economic prosperity has become synonymous to success in life. We measure success in our life using the scale of wealth. As if the purpose of life has become synonymous to economic prosperity.

One may argue that economic prosperity is important to serve mankind and humanity and necessary to come out from the predicament of poverty, malnutrition, and illiteracy. But in reality economic prosperity has failed to reduce those burdens.

According to an Oxfam report published in 2023, the richest one percent had nearly two-thirds of all new wealth created since 2020. The amount is equal to almost twice as much money as the bottom 99 percent of the world's population. That accumulation of wealth by handful is not helping the rest.

One may ponder and relate the purpose of declaring an annual list of the richest people in the world. What good does it bring to the rest of humanity?

With such stories, we educate ourselves and the next generations with the success stories of how fast one became a millionaire in their lives. Knowingly or unknowingly we infuse our hearts with the desire to earn or accumulate wealth.

Like it or not, the fact is, that not many in the world have become wealthy through a purely honest effort. At the same time, the reality is not everyone has the ability to become wealthy in an honest way. Nevertheless, the ingrained desire to become wealthy left some with no choice but to resort to one or another kind of corruption and remain relevant in the competitive world of wealth.

That raises the inevitable question - how to control our greed to become wealthy beyond our means and necessity that otherwise would provoke a corrupted part in our soul.

Going back to Datuk Anis's view on greed as the root cause of losing integrity, there is a need to address how we can control our greed. Perhaps, we shall not be able to control greed unless we stop competing for wealth or measuring success in the scale of wealth. We need to deeply realise that the purpose and success of life are immeasurable using the scale of wealth. In addition, there is a need for us to realise the inevitability of the end of life in death when the wealth we earn will be left behind.

On one hand, we are trained and programmed to acquire and accumulate wealth, on the other hand, we remain oblivious to the inevitability of ending our life in death and leaving the world empty handed. Again, many of those who believe on Judgement Day tend to ignore the magnificent reward in the life hereafter for those who despite their struggle strive for a righteous honest life.

Whether anyone believes on the Judgement Day - the realisation of the purpose of life and the inevitability of the end of life in death is important to control our greed. That in turn will minimize corruption if not bring that down to zero.

1.4. Shame on you, Professor

Sinar Daily. 2024 Oct 15

IT was utterly shocking to read the news of a young lady from Malaysia who escaped from Bangladesh out of fear of being sexually harassed.

She went to Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) to study Veterinary Medicine. Her dream and aspiration ended with an allegation of sexual harassment by a Professor at BAU.

On September 25, the Malaysian student complained of sexual harassment allegedly against Professor Harun ar Rashid of the Department of Agricultural Economics to the Vice Chancellor of BAU, to the Malaysian High Commission, and police - and being frightened silently left the country.

What else could she do but escape silently and secretly? She has every reason to be scared and mentally devastated living alone without relatives and friends in Bangladesh.

The alleged Professor Harun ar Rashid even threatened her not to file a complaint.

The alleged professor - her neighbour - was reported to send unnecessary messages and enter her house at odd times to harass her sexually. Through the kitchen window, he was reported to show his private parts to the accuser.

The BAU authorities formed a five-member investigation committee immediately after the allegations and asked to submit its report by this week. If the said complaint is considered an offense under the Penal Code or any other prevailing law upon investigation, then the BAU authority will send the matter to the appropriate Court or Tribunal.

If proven guilty, the accused will lose his job and will be in jail for a few years. Then what?

Will that young lady be able to restore her dream to become what she wanted to pursue for her career? Will the people forgive Bangladesh for such a hideous act on one of their citizens? Will any other Malaysian citizen ever consider BAU or any other university to pursue their higher education? Those are the questions that came to my mind immediately after reading the shocking news.

This is the country where I was born. Once known as the host of the Oxford of the East that is still standing as Dhaka University - the country was the host of many notable Malaysians.

For many years, hundreds if not thousands of Malaysians pursued their higher education in various fields such as Medicine, Dentistry, and Agriculture in Bangladeshi universities. Indeed political fascism for many years in Bangladesh has crippled the potential prosperity of the ill-fated nation in many directions.

Everything from money laundering, corruption, and distortion to extrajudicial killing went beyond the unprecedented level. Moral decadence in the society was not left alone.

A lack of the rule of law turned a section of the people in the country outrageous, violent, and reckless - many of whom have been holding positions with high social status.

Only one professor being accused of sexual harassment might be just the tip of the iceberg. Nothing less than that is expected in that country where a Vice Chancellor of a university or Principal of a college were accused of bribing the ruling political leaders to get the position.

Shame on you all!

What is urgently needed is a strict unbiased implementation of the rule of law against any accused irrespective of their status and identity. But that is not happening even after the students and mass uprising where thousands sacrificed their lives to free the country from 15 years long fascism.

It has been almost two months since Dr Muhammad Yunus, who has a global reputation as a financial savoir, was given the ruling authority as the Chief Advisor of the interim Government of the country after the fall of Fascist Hasina Government.

Will Dr Muhammad Yunus be able to bring back the glory of the nation?

1.5. Generation Gap: An Imposed Perception or a Reality?

Sinar Daily. 2024 Oct 11

DEFINING the term “generation” is rather complex - hence the generation gap.

A lateral way to classify generations is to identify contemporaries in the same cohort strata who are born and share similar historical moments within a period of approximately 15 years. Hence a generation is categorised based on the year one is born, such as Gen X (1965-1980), Gen Y or Millennials (1981-1996), Gen Z (1997–2012), or Gen Alpha (2010-2024).

However, the most long-standing meaning of the term generation relates to biological up/down generations in a family - vertical generations - parents and children.

Should we then define a generation gap based on the vertical generations, i.e., the gap between a parent and a child or the gap between two lateral generations such as Gen X and Gen Z or Gen Z and Gen Alpha?

Simply put, there is a difference from one generation to another in the way they react and respond to any event in life. Hence, the generation gap impacts our course of action in every aspect of life.

The way we perceive a generation gap becomes critical to determine how we want to teach or treat the next generations in school or universities, how to design the curriculum, and above all how to deal with them at home or at the workplace.

Hence, it is worth examining what might be the contributing factors to create a generation gap i.e., makes a generation different from the other.

Albeit, technological advancement has a considerable impact on work and life of a generation. Gen Z had the privilege to be born with tablets and smartphones in their hands unlike their predecessors Gen X. Similarly, Gen X had the luxury to have a personal computer unlike their predecessors. It is interesting to note that the technology a generation is born with in their grip is not their making - rather it is the making of their predecessors.

However, it is not unlikely that Gen Z compared to Gen X have higher tech-savvy preferences in work and life. Gen Z prefers flexibility and digitally-enabled workspaces while Gen X searches for work-life balance with stability in traditional career paths. Again, Gen X prefers tangible skills aligned with real-world applications, but Gen Z has preferences for digital and virtual control in their skills.

The difference between two generations has another dimension than their preferences for technology.

Gen Z are different in their psychological constructs from their predecessors. According to a Gallup-Walton Family Foundation survey conducted in 2023, Gen Z is more likely to experience negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, and loneliness. According to the same survey, only 15 per cent of members of Gen Z aged 18-26 said to have excellent mental health.

To a Gen Z, a different point of view or perspective is wrong or even can be considered “toxic”. It is common among the younger generations to label one from the older generations to “gaslighting” them if they have a disagreement. Instead of walking along the differences in opinions, they keep quiet and run away to their supposed comfort zone. Often, the difference between two generations appears as a discriminatory tool - generational “racism” - in treating each other.

The differences in psychological constructs between different generations give rise to a vital question - if there is an influence of emerging technology. In other words, do children born in a gap of 15 years have different psychological constructs such as compassion, patience, sincerity, tolerance, confidence, empathy, intuition, and respect for others because of technological advancement?

Generally, we agree that children’s behavioral and social constructs are built on the similar attributes of their parents. Beyond the parental boundary, children are exposed to social influences primarily in school and through social media.

To cut the long story short, it is safe to say, our children's psychological constructs are the product of our family and society. They are built - the way we want them to be built. As it is famously rhymed, "Children learn what they live".

Therefore, the emergence and use of a new technology is not sufficient enough that would make a generation different in their psychological constructs from the earlier generation or the next. In fact, the same is true if their genetic constructs are compared.

That makes us ponder if the generation gap - not in terms of tech-savvy preferences but in terms of psychological constructs- is more of an imposed social influence than a biological reality.

Being a Gen X, I am a father of two Gen Z and one Gen Alpha children - giving me a gap of two or three lateral generations with my children. However, in my old mindset, there is only one vertical generation gap - from a father to his children. The same is true for many families having children with more than one lateral generation.

It is not uncommon that children having a lateral generation gap within the same family act and behave in a similar manner and build a similar worldview. Again, being from the same lateral generation, the differences between two children from the same family are also noticeable.

Hence, there is no reason for us to think that children having different psychological constructs are the results of their lateral generational identity as they are born in a gap of 15 years or born amidst a new technology.

Irrespective of when and where a baby is born, they are born as fragile and chirpy with lovable innocence and purity.

The color, race, or status does not affect the beauty of the smile of a baby that is always as sweet as a white rose with a sprinkle of dew drops on its petals. Holding a baby gives us the feeling of warmth and tranquillity of a pacific morning sunshine.

Technology is way too inert to influence those invariable verities. Hence, if there is a generation gap because of a difference in the psychological constructs between two generations - that is because of how a new generation is raised in a family and a society, not the year or the technology they are born with.

1.6. The Mosque: A Garden of Spirit, a House of Wisdom, and a Hub of Civilisation

Sinar Daily. 2024 Sept 22

MUSLIMS around the world go to masjid primarily for daily five times prayers, prayers on Eid days, and sometimes for weddings or prayers for those who have died. During Ramadan, mosques premises are used to organise parties for Iftar, Taraweeh prayers, and religious discourse. All in all, a masjid is mostly a place for rituals. Some of those rituals have a purpose that is more than just rituals.

Prayers, such as five obligatory daily prayers help the worshipers to strengthen their spirituality. A worshiper may use a masjid as a premise for different forms of prayers and dhikr (remembrance) to engage in spiritual enlightenment - connecting themselves and the creator - in a silo or in a congregation.

Other community-engaging rituals such as iftar parties, weddings, and prayers for those who passed at a masjid premise can help to rebuild social engagement. In fact, mosques can play more roles than ritual-based engagement for the sustainable development of the community.

In addition to teaching recitation of the Noble Quran as well as learning Arabic, the mosque premise can be used to teach other languages such as English, Mandarin, and Tamil to children and youths. Community members can play the role of trainers voluntarily. This will help to reinforce the acceptance of diverse cultures among Malaysians.

Imagine a mosque hosts a library with books not only on religions but also on historical, social, and scientific issues written in a popular format. That will encourage members of the community including children to come to learn contemporary issues along with the knowledge from Islamic texts. Thus a masjid could play the role of a house of wisdom. All that is needed is to build a library at the masjid premise that hosts books with valuable knowledge and skills.

The mosque premises can be used for voluntary healthcare services using the experts of the community. Once on a weekly or monthly basis, a healthcare expert can use the mosque premise to listen to the health issues and complaints from the rest of the community at an individual level. If not for a complete intervention, volunteer community healthcare professionals can engage themselves to improve the healthy lifestyle of the worshipers and the rest in the community.

From a spiritual perspective, such a voluntary service for the community is worth expecting a great reward as an act of Sadaqah Jariyah - the same act would strengthen bonding among the community members too.

Historically, Kaba at the center of Masjid-al haram in the Makkah Mukarramah has been a place of business and trade not only for the people of Makkah but also for the people from as far as Syria and some parts of Africa. Following that model of the mosque as a center of business and trade, the mosque premise at the current time could be opened for business and trade for daily commodities including food. Given the infrastructure and other physical resources, items for business and trade could be chosen based on priority.

In the context of today's reliance on internet-based search engines, it is also important to bring all masjids under the umbrella of an online network where users can find detailed information about the masjid including the events and activities organised by each mosque. This will also greatly benefit travelers to locate a masjid in the neighborhood of their destination and during the journey.

Thus a mosque - beyond the boundary of its limited and traditional use for rituals - could be more useful for the community to address the health, financial, and education of the community members engaging their volunteer members. A masjid as a garden of spirit, a house of wisdom, and a hub of civilization can play a critical role in community development and nation-building.

1.7. Namibia food crisis and global food waste / Let’s do it right

Life News Agency. 2024 Sept 12
Apa Khabar TV. 2024 Sept 27

Namibia – a country with less than 3 million population – to be exact 2,645,805, in 2024 – is facing the worst food crisis amidst the worst drought in decades. To solve the hunger crisis, the Namibian government announced to sacrifice 723 wild animals namely elephants, hippos, buffaloes, impalas, wildebeests, and zebras on August 29 – a decision condemned by the wildlife conservationist.

“This is a tragic and short-sighted approach,” said Emmanuel Kankara, an activist working for the Namibian Wildlife Conservation Trust. “This isn’t about feeding people; it’s about winning votes,” said Edgar Toivo, another conservationist. “These elephants are critical to the ecosystem, and their loss would be devastating,” said Matana Ng’weli, a wildlife scientist at Tanzania Wildlife Research Institute specializing in elephant conservation. And there are many more concerns and condemnations.

While the Namibian Government was suggested to look at the root cause of the food crisis and to focus on efficient agricultural technology, what does condemnation and advice mean to those malnourished people who waded through rugged terrain desperately searching for food and water? Albeit, I am not able to fathom their desperation as I never starved except for ritual fasting during Ramadan.

While acknowledging the failure and shortsighted approach of the Namibian Government, let us think about possible means to saving the hungry lives before we show our concern about the wildlife and ecosystem.

According to the UNEP 2023 report, different kinds of food waste exist. More than 900 million tons of food were lost in the supply chain, from harvest to reaching retail shelves in 2021. A different category of food waste comprises suboptimal food – defined for various causes such as the distortion of shape, near-expiry date, and packaging or wrapping. However, the intrinsic nutrient quality and safety of the foods remain unchanged. Much of those foods go to the bin because of consumers’ reluctance to purchase or consume those suboptimal food – eventually thrown as waste.

According to a report from UNEP 2024, global household, food service, and retail food waste was estimated to be 1.05 billion tons in 2022. In reality, the data might be far less than the actual food waste. A simple math tells us that 2,876,712 tons of food go to waste every day – numerically that is more than the head counts in Namibia.

Surely one Namibian would not need one ton (1000 Kg) of food a day for their survival. On average, 1-1.5 Kg of food per day is sufficient for an average human. Thus, considering other categories of food waste, a couple of thousand times more food is going to waste than a human needs a day.

The concern is how to send that food – before it goes to waste – to the hungry people around the world. Looking at the advancement of transport technology, we can claim confidently that the world today does not lack the logistics and resources to send those foods to Namibia and elsewhere. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines were sent to every corner of the world in weeks if not in days.

It could be argued that the situation during the pandemic was acute and not chronic, while the food shortage and famine in African countries is a chronic problem. Hence solving an acute problem is not the same as a chronic one. Yet, it is not a strong argument.

For the sake of peace and democracy, world leaders have shown their ability and enthusiasm to provide a continuous supply of warheads and arms to anywhere in the world. Sending a continuous supply of food to a famine-stricken country is not a big deal.

Therefore, wildlife conservationists and scientists might consider putting pressure on the world leaders to aid the agenda of food supply to the hungry people on a regular basis. In addition, they also could have their own agenda to collect and distribute foods that are potentially “destined” to go to waste among the hungry people in Africa. Even regular passenger aircraft could offer a certain space to transfer food to those who are in need.

While wildlife and environment protection groups have their own budget for many environmental protection programs and projects, they could have one on food distribution to the hungry people. This could be justified with the rationale that wildlife will continue to live for the balance of the ecosystem rather than becoming the meal of hungry people. Furthermore, if those Africans remain healthy, the target for environmental protection will be easier to achieve too.

1.8. The epitome of leadership

Life News Agency. 2024 Sept 17
Bebas News. 2024 Oct 01

The leadership qualities of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) are unparalleled. Michael H. Hart in his book "The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History" placed Prophet Muhammad on top of the list. To Hart and perhaps to many others, Muhammad was "the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the secular and religious level".

His exemplary approaches and leadership strategies left a profound impact on the theory and practice of leadership beyond the boundary of ruling a Muslim nation and the time he lived in.

Prophet Muhammad has been revered for his humane qualities: trustworthiness, honesty, humility, justice, compassion and empathy, patience, vision, adaptability, courage and resilience, wisdom, communication skills, inclusivity, and above all piety. Some emphasize his humane qualities to describe his stature as the best leader of mankind.

Others find him a wise and charismatic leader for his military strategies, planning for Medina-centric nationhood with the Medina Constitution, dealing with enemies to his nation such as signing the Hudaibiya Treaty, and the vision to build the nation with spiritual and worldly views.

However, taking him as a role model as a human and as a leader needs to put together a few missing links (puzzles?) about him which are generally ignored in the discussion.

1. Prophet Mohamamd was chosen by Allah the Almighty as the last Messenger and the leader of mankind – for which he was prepared by divine command since his childhood and became the best example of humane attributes. An example of that preparedness is described in a hadith – as his chest was opened and cleaned by the angels when he was a child.

2. Furthermore, the Prophet did not have any formal education or training – he was illiterate in the sense that he was unable to read and write. The strongest argument in favor of this notion goes with the idea that Allah the Almighty wanted to leave a sign that the Noble Quran is His divine decree and not composed by an educated man. In every aspect of his decision-making from his personal life to leading the Muslim ummah, he relied on the divine codes – the Noble Quran.

3. Prophet Muhammad used the Noble Quran as the constitution to rule his nation. With his political acumen as well as humane and leadership qualities, he followed the principles of the Noble Quran.

4. Prophet Muhammad embraced success the way it is defined in the Noble Quran. The Quran mentions two types of success: falah (success in this life, mainly) and fawz (ultimate success in the next life). Again, fawz has been described as al-fawz-ul-adheem (triumphant success), al-fawz-ul-mubeen (evident success), and al-fawz-al-kabeer (huge success). Thus, success in the spirit of Islam is defined differently than how it is defined in terms of prosperity in modern times.

Now, one might want to relate those aspects of his life to find the relevance of Prophet Muhammad as the role model of leadership in modern-day politics.

Contrary to Prophet Muhammad who was chosen as a leader by the Almighty Allah, the leaders are chosen by their supporters (or voters). While the humane qualities of the prophet Muhammad were guided by divine intervention, the same is not expected for anyone else.

Let us take two of his qualities – truthfulness and a sense of justice. Prophet Muhammad was named al-Amin by the people of Mecca for his truthfulness. He never lied in his life. Albeit, their conviction of Prophet Muhammad reversed soon after he declared his prophethood and invited them to worship none but the Almighty Allah. On the contrary, knowing the art of hiding the truth (or lying in other words?) is an important skill in modern-day political dominance.

Prophet Muhammad set an ultimate example of justice for the people he ruled – irrespective of their race, religion, or faith. Despite having every opportunity to cause suffering to or punish the people of Mecca after conquering Mecca, Prophet Muhammad ordained not to touch anyone or anything that belonged to the

Meccans and let them live as they were. However, in modern-day politics, the ability to entrap the people of different tents is a skill and a "must-to-do" in the political arena.

It is true that none of us may reach the level of preparedness by divine control the way Prophet Muhammad was. Nevertheless, his humane qualities were set as the benchmark (Quran 33:21) for mankind so that any individual who aims to be a leader of a community or a nation would want to follow him.

It is often argued that Prophet Muhammad used his personal wisdom or political acumen, besides the divine codes, as he needed. The Medina Constitution and the Hudaibiya Treaty – are often discussed as examples of the strategic leadership quality of Prophet Muhammad . Neither the composition of the Medina Constitution nor the acceptance of the Hudaibiya are part of the revelations.

However, verses from the Noble Quran (53:2-3) confirm his absolute reliance on divine guidance, "Your fellow man (Prophet Muhammad) is neither misguided nor astray. Nor does he speak of his own whims."

That leads to the conclusion that a successful leader who wishes to lead a nation for peace, prosperity, and harmony might want to follow the guiding principles of the Noble Quran. That brings an important consideration to address – if a leader would be able to achieve the same level of success without following the Noble Quran that Allah defines as the complete code of life for mankind. Besides, success must be viewed the way Prophet Muhammad viewed that for life here and hereafter.

Muslims are obliged to obey him as their leader and at the same time, obliged to do so with their current leaders (Quran 4:59). For a Muslim, obeying the last Messenger has many dimensions – from practicing religious rituals and following his lifestyle to leading a nation. Not surprisingly then, he remains relevant to motivate the leaders among the Muslim nations using him as a role model.

For every Muslim, Prophet Muhammad should be regarded simultaneously as the best example of a spiritual guide, a statesman, a military leader, and a community organizer- above all the last Messenger. Taking Prophet Muhammad as the role model of a leader necessitates combining all aspects of the last Messenger – his personal humane qualities, his leadership qualities, and his reliance on divine guidance.

1.9. Permanent residents must understand local culture and make meaningful contributions

New Straits Times. 2024 Sep 03

IN legal terms, permanent residents (PR) are not citizens but have permission to live in a country indefinitely without any other visa or work permit. Like in other countries, those living in Malaysia as a PR enjoy a few significant privileges.

Besides the permission to stay and work indefinitely, a PR can open a business and has the right to apply for citizenship in the long run.

Their children may become citizens immediately after they are born. However granting PR status to a foreigner is not an obligation for any government.

But immigrant-dependent countries adopt provisions that might allow a foreigner to apply for permanent residency.

And each country has its own set of requirements to award permanent residency to a foreigner. For example, one may become eligible to apply for PR status only after living in Malaysia for 12 years.

Once awarded permanent residency, a PR becomes eligible for certain rights and privileges. Before a PR would seek their rights and privileges, they need to fathom the expectations of Malaysians from them.

The expectations to speak Bahasa Melayu and protect the name and interest of the rakyat would be top of the list and adapting themselves to local culture.

Indeed, raising the rights and privileges of an immigrant or a PR in a public forum has become more challenging than ever before.

Violence against immigrant populations has become more epidemic than sporadic. If not seen as an enemy to the nation, immigrant populations are often seen as a burden.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of a PR, one would want to enjoy the rights and privileges that make their living in Malaysia meaningful more as a human than a legal resident.

A PR has access to education and healthcare with fees to be paid similar to a foreigner. Besides, he can own a property where the terms and conditions for the purchase are also similar to a foreigner.

Sadly, it is often forgotten or ignored how immigrant populations, including PRs, contribute to the economic prosperity of a nation, especially those who are heavily dependent on foreign labour and professional forces.

In reality, a PR in Malaysia is no more than a foreigner except for their rights to live here without being dependent on an additional visa or work permit.

There will be no more argument if that is viewed using the "give and take" principle. Immigrant workforces such as PRs are paid for their services that they might not earn and enjoy in their country of origin.

From a humane perspective, it is more than just give and take or a legal obligation to grant permission to work and live in a country as a PR.

As a matter of fact, a PR neither belongs to the country they are residing nor they belong to their country of origin. In their heart, they carry a dilemma; in their hand, they hold a dossier of their legal identity.

Their legal identity provides their physical and logistic needs to live in a country - but this is far from having the peace of mind of belonging and ownership of what and whom they work for.

To have a more humane life, a PR does not have to have citizenship or voting rights but could be given the privilege of healthcare, education, and some minor facilities to roam around in the country with a pride that they are not an alien.

Awarding PR status to a foreigner should be about their human and moral obligation to making meaningful contributions and spending a significant time of their life in service to others in the country.

1.10. Social media versus internet blackout in politics

Malaysia Gazette. 2024 Aug 26
Life News Agency. 2024 Aug 26
Focus Malaysia. 2024 Aug 26
Malay Mail. 2024 Aug 27
Business Today. 2024 Aug 27

FACEBOOK, YouTube, Instagram, and X – they all have become a part of our lives. A couple of decades ago, this integration (read invasion) of social media in our daily lives was beyond our imagination. If not all, most of us are followers of someone on one or more of those social media platforms. While others have millions of followers. Needless to say, social media also plays an important role in personal communication as well as in shaping our perception to interact with other individuals and build a social network.

More role in personal communication as well as in shaping our perception to interact with other individuals and build a social network. More than that it is used to grab and propagate information for academic, business, political, and entertainment purposes. In a nutshell, the impact of social media is beyond the perceived and observed changes in the information landscape. The key to social media invasion in our lives lies in its electronic speed and unprecedented magnanimity of global attention. The era started during the 1980s and eventually came under the tag "Digital Revolution".

Taking those advantages, political leaders and activists use social media to propagate their agenda. Thus social media has become a common tool for political propaganda. Social media platforms are often flooded with fabricated or fake information. Like it or not, certain popular news agencies and popular social media influencers are also accused of spreading fake information using their social media accounts. Along with the authentic information, the misinformation and disinformation in social media are often multiplied to build fake narratives.

Social media influencers in a group or individually, have their own trick to attract social media users' attention and play key roles in changing the political perception – consequently affecting the political landscape. Capitalizing on the "attention" economy in social media with the pursuit of virality, political social media influencers diffuse their content into their target social media group aimed at the target political agenda.

The target group uses their cognitive filter to process the information on social media and build their perception – which ultimately makes them act or react. Needless to say, not all have efficient and prudent cognitive filters. However, both the cognitive filter and the content control the collective behavior and response of the receivers – eventually, reshaping or rebuilding the political perception.

Whether social media-based content is harmful or violates the norms of a society or culture, could be controlled by the censorship policies of the respective social media platform. At the same time, Governments have had the luxury of enjoying their authoritative directive using constitutional acts to impose restrictions on contents that are allowed to be circulated or access to social media that their citizens can subscribe to. For example, FaceBook and YouTube content are currently banned in countries namely China, Iran, and North Korea.

There are records of other countries who blocked different social media transiently. For example, YouTube was blocked in Bangladesh in March 2009 after the circulation of a video revealing a display of anger by military personnel on the issue of mutiny by border guards in Dhaka during an alleged meeting with the former PM Sheikh Hasina. Apart from the restrictions on social media usage, a new tool has emerged to deny citizens access to social media platforms. That is internet blackouts. Recently, a nationwide internet blackout was imposed by the government of Bangladesh during the month-long anti-discrimination movement of the students. Aiming to create a communication blockade, the Government imposed an internet blackout on 18 July that lasted for more than a week.

It was assumed that the internet blackout was imposed to create a communication gap between the movement organizers throughout the country. It also helped the (recently ousted) government to hide the brutal crackdowns on the students and mass people. Indeed, the internet blackout did not help the long-standing dictatorial government to continue its fascist regime. On 5th August 2024, Sheikh Hasina was forced to resign and left the country to have a temporary shelter in India.

To control political opposition, Pakistan started to maneuver the same trick. Since February, there has been a total or partial restriction on the use of social media. And now, the internet speed has reduced noticeably. In

India, authorities have blocked internet access for about 27 million people in the state of Punjab to silence the violent protesting against the Badalpur sexual abuse case. Much earlier than those, the internet and telecommunication in Gaza were destroyed during this ongoing genocide by Israel since Dec 2023.

In principle, the purpose of such network disruption to create communication blackouts is the same as the age-old war-time trick where bridges and roads were destroyed to prevent transportation and communication of the army. However, political coup through communication blackouts in this digital era seems to have little or no impact in favor of those who use that trick. On one hand, social media provides a platform to propagate political agenda. On the other hand, internet blackouts are becoming increasingly “popular” to suppress or hide that agenda. However; in the end, the truth finds its way to the global audience.

1.11. Truth always prevails over communication blackouts

New Straits Times. 2024 Aug 26

SOCIAL media platforms have become an integral part of our lives. This integration (read invasion) of social media in our daily lives goes beyond our imagination.

If not all, at least most of us are followers of someone on one or more of these social media platforms. Some social media influencers even have millions of followers.

Social media plays an important role in personal communication as well as in shaping our perception to interact with individuals and in building a social network.

More than that it is used to propagate information for academic, business, political and entertainment purposes. In a nutshell, the impact of social media is beyond the perceived and observed changes in the information landscape.

The key to social media invasion in our lives lies in its electronic speed and unprecedented global attention. Hence social media has become a common tool for propaganda. They are often flooded with fabricated or fake information. Like it or not, certain media agencies and popular social media influencers are also accused of spreading fake information using social media accounts.

Along with authentic information, the misinformation and disinformation in social media are often multiplied to build fake narratives. Social media influencers, either in a group or individually, have their own tricks to attract the attention of users and play key roles in changing perceptions, thereby affecting the political landscape.

With the goal of virality, political social media influencers diffuse their content into their target social media groups with messages aimed at a specific agenda. Needless to say, not all have efficient and prudent cognitive filters.

Whether social media-based content is harmful or violates the norms of a society or culture could be controlled by the censorship policies of the respective social media platform.

At the same time, governments have had the luxury of enjoying their authoritative directive using constitutional acts to impose restrictions on contents that are allowed to be circulated or access to social media that their citizens can subscribe to.

YouTube was blocked in Bangladesh in March 2009 after the circulation of a video revealing a display of anger by military personnel on the issue of mutiny by border guards in Dhaka during an alleged meeting with the former prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

Apart from the restrictions on social media usage, a new tool in the form of Internet blackouts has emerged to deny citizens access to social media platforms. Recently, a nationwide Internet blackout was imposed by the Bangladesh government during the month-long anti-discrimination movement by the country's students.

Aiming to create a communication blockade, the authorities imposed an Internet blackout on July 18 that lasted for more than a week. The Internet blackout was imposed to create a communication gap among the student movement's organisers throughout the country.

It also helped the (recently ousted) government to hide the brutal crackdown on the protesting students and people. On Aug 5, 2024, Sheikh Hasina was forced to resign and left the country to seek temporary shelter in India.

In Pakistan, since February, there has been a total or partial restriction on the use of social media. And now, the Internet speed has been reduced noticeably.

In India, authorities have blocked Internet access for about 27 million people in the state of Punjab to silence the violent protests against the Badalpur sexual abuse case.

In Gaza, Internet and telecommunication facilities were destroyed during the ongoing war by Israel in late 2023.

In principle, the purpose of such network disruptions to create communication blackouts is the same as the age-old war-time strategy where bridges and roads were destroyed to prevent transportation and communication of the enemy army.

However, communication blackouts in this digital era seem to have little or no impact. In the end, the truth eventually finds its way to the global audience.

1.12. Are minorities in Bangladesh under attack?

Life News Agency. 2024 Aug 19
The Malaysian Insight. 2024 Aug 20
Apa Khabar TV. 2024 Aug 26

Let me begin with the bottom line of this discussion, “any form of violence against any kind of minorities, irrespective of their race, religion, or political affiliation is unacceptable and deserves an utter condemnation”

The recent student-led anti-discrimination movement ended in a Mass uprising in Bangladesh that eventually forced Sheikh Hasina – the former PM of Bangladesh – to flee to the neighboring country India on 5th August 2024. Sheikh Hasina has been given a temporary stay in India while other countries such as the USA and the UK did not respond positively to her call for permanent shelter. Notably, the number of accusations against Sheikh Hasina for extrajudicial crackdowns and killings of hundreds and thousands of people including opposition political activists is increasing. That includes a complaint to the investigation agencies of the International Criminal Court.

Years of anger and frustrations of the mass people in Bangladesh reached a boiling point where men, women, and children came on the street to echo the one-point demand of the student movement – the resignation of Sheikh Hasina as the prime minister. Sheikh Hasina attempted to resist it by force which eventually killed more than 500 hundred deaths including more than 30 children in less than a month of movement from 15 July until 5 August 2024.

The country was in chaos, at least for three days, after the forced Hasina’s resignation because of the withdrawal of the law enforcement agencies to do their duties. Hundreds of policemen including top officials went into hiding for their fear of being victims of mass outrage. For more than a decade, the Bangladesh Police was accused of being an “auxiliary force” of the ousted ruling party – Awami League (AL).

Once Sheikh Hasina resigned, people did not hesitate to massacre anything and everything that is connected to her legacy and her party – that ironically included the highest Government properties such as the Parliament building.

Numerous incidents of looting, robbery, and burning of houses and properties belonging to leaders and supporters of AL were observed amidst the crisis of law and order in the country. Most, if not all, were targeted against the leaders and supporters of AL. It is a fact that the majority of Hindus in Bangladesh support and favor AL. Hence, to become a victim of the people’s outrage was not entirely because of their religious affiliation rather, it was ignited against their political affiliation with AL.

However, sporadic incidences of burning of very few Hindu temples during the outrage testifies to targeted violence purely for religious affiliation too. Soon after such incidents were reported, in the absence of police force in their duties, people from all sects including students and Islamic faith-based political parties guarded houses and temples of Hindus in Bangladesh. Abundant news and videos are available showing those protections.

Student leaders and leaders of all political parties strongly denounced any violence against any minorities. Furthermore, representatives of the association of minority religious groups gratefully acknowledged the efforts of students and mass people to guard their lives and lands.

Yet certain India-based online portals and media continued their series of disinformation propaganda to defame and discredit the mass uprise in Bangladesh. It is worth mentioning that many of the AL leaders who were ministers of parliament members of the ousted Government are now being prosecuted for murders, money laundering, and violence against innocent citizens.

The ulterior motive behind the targeted disinformation could be aimed to discredit the victory of the people against Hasina’s fascist regime. The targeted disinformation also defames the image of the interim Government led by Noble Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus. In response to such defamation, Muhammad Yunus told Indian PM Modi that the reports of attacks on minorities are not only ‘exaggerated’ but also he invited Indian journalists to visit the country and see it by themselves. Such a bold statement testifies the intention and efforts of Muhammad Yunus against any violence against minorities in Bangladesh.

It is not unlikely that the Indian Government is upset about the ouster of Sheikh Hasina. On several occasions, ministers of Sheikh Hasina's government openly declared their obedience to the Indian Government. Even after the ouster, Sajib Wajed Joy – Son of Sheikh Hasina – requested India to "pressure" Bangladesh to hold an election within 90 days. Joy did not hesitate to make such a request after a series of inconsistent statements that included his desire to withdraw from politics and a claim that her mother did not resign hence is still the lawful PM in Bangladesh.

It is also not unlikely that peace-loving people around the world including Malaysians who raise their voices through a peaceful demonstration in front of the Embassy of Bangladesh in Ampang (Kuala Lumpur), against any violence against minorities in Bangladesh.

If not politically motivated, they are concerned about the safety and security of the minority groups in Bangladesh. However, it would be wiser to check facts, if their demands are based on any exaggerated or disinformed media reports. Or else, this would add to the anger of the people of Bangladesh who have rightfully developed a perception that India helped and supported a fascist government for more than 15 years in Bangladesh.

In fact, along with their demand for the safety and security of Hindus, the peace-loving Malaysians should have stood by the people of Bangladesh who went through a dictatorial regime of Sheikh Hasina where many practicing Muslims – being accused of anti-independent force – were tortured and marginalized.

Surely, people in Bangladesh who came out of fascism do not want to see their neighbor as their enemy only because the neighboring government had a good term with the ousted former PM Sheikh Hasina.

1.13. Bangladesh: How far are the fruits and flavors of the second independence?

Business Today. 2024 Aug 07
Malaysia Gazette. 2024 Aug 07
Life News Agency. 2024 Aug 07
Asia News Today. 2024 Aug 10

A mighty brutal power of Awami League (AL) was knocked out by the massive resistance of thousands of people marching towards Ganabhaban – the residence of the ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina – amidst the curfew. The nation paid a high price to achieve that freedom from the enduring brutal AL regime.

More than 100 civilians including 13 police personnel were killed on 4 August 2024. A forced resignation came a day after, on 5 August 2024. The actual death toll since the rise of the anti-discrimination movement on 15 July 2024 perhaps will remain unknown.

An anti-discrimination movement led by the students initially targeted for govt service quota reformation evolved into a one-point demand – the resignation of Sheikh Hasina and her Government.

The movement got momentum and turned into a massive uprising of people from all sects of society – who demanded justice and stop the killing of innocent civilians including children. The remarkable gathering of mass people on 3rd August 2024 at the Central Monument (Shaheed Minar) at Dhaka University premise – a tribute to the martyrs of the Language Movement in 1952 – surpassed the vigor and volume of any other mass movement in the history of the nation.

After the last round of brutal crackdown on 4th August, student coordinators of the anti-discrimination movement called for a long march to siege Ganabhaban. That ended in the forced resignation of Sheikh Hasina – who has evolved from one of the most influential women leaders to the leader of the most fascist government in the history of the nation. She will be remembered more as a murderer Sheikh Hasina than as a Prime Minister or daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

This was in the month of August 1975, when Sheikh Hasina's father, mother, and many other family members were killed in their residence. In August 1975, the nation celebrated the killing of the Sheikh family. And, now in August 2024 the nation is celebrating the fall of Sheikh Hasina – well known for her arrogance, lies, denial, pride, and above all greed for power.

Hasina boastfully used to claim "This is my country, my father made it independent …" A clear denial of millions of mass people who fought for independence and many of them died in the war. Now she knows, this is not her country – she is just one of 170 million Bangladeshi citizens and her father was not more than a leader of the nation during the period of independence war.

The message is clear for those who will helm the "throne" hereafter. No one is invincible or inevitable, and the country belongs to none but the citizens.

What is next for those who will steer the wheel and for those who will follow the journey to build a crippled nation. A nation where corruption, politicization of government institutions including judiciary and law-enforcement agencies, and money laundering by the AL leaders and their allies became a norm.

The proposed interim Government vowed to bring back peace to the nation. An immediate release of Begum Khaleda Zia – Chairperson of the main opposition, and those who are in prison due to politically motivated or false accusations are also part of the deal. The Army Chief requested the nation to calm down and promised to ensure justice for those who were responsible for killing civilians during the anti-discrimination movement.

The composition of the interim government, the mechanism to fulfill the promises to the nation, and finally the responses of the masses will determine how far is peace for the nation.

Meanwhile, vandalism; setting fires on houses of AL leaders, minority groups, and AL offices; and attacking police personnel have erupted overnight. This indeed is counterproductive to the "bloody" achievement – the second independence – as the nation contemplates it.

It will not be easy to identify the actual perpetrators – whether it was politically ignited or simply because of the enduring anger and frustrations of the mass people. However, if the situation continues, undoubtedly the nation will suffer a set-back with an image of being fundamental militants. Sajeeb Wazed, son of Sheikh Hasina, has already made that claim in an interview with India-based media.

The situation is volatile with the difference in expectation for the composition of the interim Government mainly between the coordinators of the anti-discrimination movement and the individual including the Army Chief holding authority. Expectations of the political parties and that of the student coordinators are not synchronized in toto.

The coordinators of the anti-discrimination movement clearly demanded a total reformation of governance. They demanded rooting out the corruption, politicization of the government organizations, release of all the student and public prisoners arrested during their movement, and justice for those responsible for the killings of innocent civilians during the movement. To them ousting Sheikh Hasina is just the first step.

Will these challenges delay the relish of the fruits and flavors of the second independence?

Indeed, it will depend on how the interim Government is formed and how fast those who are responsible for forming the interim government react.

1.14. A Look At Malaysia's Commitment To SDG-3 *[with Sheila Ramalingam and Anis Yusal Yusoff]*

Business Today. 2024 Jul 27

Malaysia has shown her commitment to the shared vision of the 2030 United Nations agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for peace and prosperity for all on earth, for now and into the future.

The UN member states accepted the urgent call for action for the 17 SDGs ranging from ending poverty and hunger, good health and wellbeing, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable clean energy, decent work, economic growth, industrial and innovative infrastructure, responsible consumption and production, climate change, life on land and below water, and peace and justice.

Each goal has its own set of targets, and achievements will be monitored and evaluated at both the state and global levels. The SDG-3 was set to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

Malaysia has achieved commendable success in a number of targets for SDG-3. For example, Malaysia's healthcare system yielded excellent outcomes in reducing the maternal mortality ratio by ensuring 100% attendance of skilled professionals for births, maintaining low rates in maternal, neonatal, and under-five mortality rates, and maintaining low incidences of HIV cases and malaria.

Nevertheless, Malaysia is yet to achieve reasonable success in reducing the prevalence and premature mortality from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) through prevention and treatment.

NCDs such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases (CVD) and cancer are leading causes of death globally, as well as in Malaysia. According to an estimation by the World Health Organisation (WHO) for Malaysia, the number of diabetics will reach approximately 2.5 million in 2030 compared to about one million in 2000, which amounts to a more than 160% rise. The percentage of adult males who are overweight and obese has increased from about 30% to above 50% from 1993 to 2019 and the trend is on the rise. The National Health Screening Initiative 2023 found that more than half of Malaysians screened are overweight or obese (53.5% in combination). On World Cancer Day (4 February 2023) cancer researchers estimated approximately 1 in 10 individuals in Malaysia to be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime. Further, 15% of 109,164 medically certified deaths were caused by coronary artery disease in Malaysia.

Taken together, these reports confirm the rise in the prevalence and mortality of NCDs over the years in Malaysia. What is more alarming is that the NCDs are linked to one another. For example, obesity is one of the major risk factors for the development of diabetes. In turn, both obesity and diabetes are major modifiable risk factors that can lead to CVD. Again, diabetes is associated with increased cancer risk.

Apart from the genetic predisposition, NCDs eventuate largely because of our dietary and lifestyle practices. This includes sugar consumption, physical inactivity, imbalanced food habits, and an overall imbalance in the ratio of calorie intake and exhaustion. Hence, addressing these dietary and lifestyle deterrents, and choosing good health practices is a major way forward to curb the aggression of NCDs.

At an individual level, every Malaysian can make a valiant effort to change common habits of consuming excessive sugar, engaging in physical activity, and avoiding irregular and insufficient sleep cycles. Furthermore, avoiding habits like smoking and drinking (alcohol) would help to reduce the chances of CVD and cancers.

At the institutional level, employers in general need to recognize the need for work-life balance for the employees. As a means to achieve work -life balance, a policy for official communications until a cut-off time on weekdays, and no communications during weekends and holidays could help to reduce the stress and anxiety of employees.

Respect and provision for personal and family time could benefit the mental health of the employees which in turn would reflect in their physical health and productivity at work. Having a mental health counselling division as part of the human resources department to deal with work-related stress would benefit too. Provision for a

30-minute light group physical exercise at a convenient time during work could encourage the employees to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

At the social and community level, there could be more incentives given for the organising of sporting and social events such as marathons, hiking, cycling, bazaars, and cultural exhibitions that would further add to the culture of promoting a healthy physical and mental lifestyle.

In addition, Government authorities, notably the Ministry of Health, must create more awareness about the hidden dangers of NCDs. More educational advertisements on health in general, and NCDs in particular, need to be created for content not only in traditional media such as newspapers and news portals on radio and television, but also in popular social media outlets such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube as this is the language of the younger generation.

The government might consider taking additional preventive measures such as imposing a higher tax on items that are on the list of risk factors of NCDs such as junk food, sugar, cigarettes, and alcohol.

Indeed, preventing lifestyle diseases by instilling awareness and creating good and healthy lifestyle practices is easier said than done. However, at the institutional and Governmental policy level, there is a lot more that could be done to tame the rising trend of NCDs.

The world has seen tremendous success in medical biotechnology such as producing new vaccines in a couple of months to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. By engaging in global leadership and awareness, Malaysia was also successful in curbing the unprecedented pandemic. Despite the differences in nature and progression of NCDs and COVID-19, engaging global leadership and awareness shares the same path in curbing NCDs as it was for COVID19.…

1.15. The anti-quota protest and govt crackdown in Bangladesh

Free Malaysia Today. 2024 Jul 20
Business Today. 2024 Jul 24
Life News Agency. 2024 Jul 24
Akses Malaysia. 2024 Jul 24

In early June, students in Bangladesh, under a non-political banner, began a peaceful protest against the 30% quota for government jobs reserved for the descendants of freedom fighters.

The provision for a temporary quota-based recruitment in government jobs is enshrined in the nation's constitution, but it is intended for unprivileged groups, including women, tribal groups, and people with disabilities.

As a gesture of gratitude, respect, and need, freedom fighters and their descendants were awarded certain privileges after independence, leading to the quota provision for government jobs.

Practically speaking, the children of the youngest freedom fighters from 1971 would exceed the age limit to enter a government job by 2024. Hence, the beneficiaries of the 30% quota would be the grandchildren of the freedom fighters, which is logically questionable.

Furthermore, their estimated number would not exceed 0.5% of the total population, and many of them do not belong to unprivileged groups in the country.

Ironically, after deducting the quota for other groups, less than 45% of the jobs in the same category are available to those qualified based on their performance in the lengthy and rigorous evaluation process for recruitment.

Amid a student protest in 2018, the 30% quota for the descendants of freedom fighters was cancelled. Apparently, the then prime minister (who is also the current prime minister) cancelled the quota provision out of frustration or annoyance. This act was questioned since the prime minister is expected to act without anger, grief, annoyance, or prejudice.

Recently, the High Court's verdict declared the 2018 cancellation of the quota by executive order illegal. The High Court's verdict was not welcomed by the current students.

Thus, the rise of the 2024 Quota Reform Movement resulted in the Bangla Blockade. Gradually, but at an unprecedented pace, the protest under the umbrella of the "Anti-Discrimination Students' Movement" gained momentum across the country.

For logical reasons, the movement is supported by the masses, irrespective of their political or other affiliations.

Initially, the general students' protest was foolishly countered by the Bangladesh Awami League's student wing, Chhatra League, allegedly under the command and protection of the ruling party. Chhatra League is known for its violence against general students and student wings of other political parties.

Failing to suppress the massive and firm student protest, leaders and activists of Chhatra League from university dormitories had to flee. General students started to pay a deadly price for standing against the High Court's decision and for humiliating leaders and activists of Chhatra League.

On July 16, Abu Sayed, a student of Begum Rokeya University (Rangpur), stood unarmed in front of the police with his hands extended in the air. Police shot him dead. The protest took a twist and now has resulted in more than 50 deaths, mostly university students, with the number increasing daily, if not hourly.

After initially denying the demands for quota reform, the law minister of the country offered a dialogue. However, it was perhaps too late for those who lost their friends and loved ones. The situation became more volatile.

The government continued the crackdown in an autocratic manner. The country is now literally disconnected from the rest of the world. Any form of network has been blocked by the government. Immigrants from Bangladesh living in different parts of the world are unable to contact their family and relatives for more than 24 hours.

No one knows what is happening in Bangladesh. Can the rest of the world do something about it?

1.16. Going by the book

Apa Khabar TV. 2024 Jul 17

Ethics Committee or Institutional review boards (IRB) are meant to scrutinize if a proposed research is planned to be conducted following ethical guidelines.

Formally ethical scrutiny started with the Nuremberg Military Tribunal's decision (1946-1949) – popularly known as the Nuremberg Code – which consists of ten aspects of permissible medical experimentation on humans. According to the codes, humane experimentation must "satisfy moral, ethical, and legal aspects" and benefit society.

Later at the 8th World Medical Association General Assembly held in 1964 a Declaration of Helsinki was adopted. The amended version of the declaration comprises ethical principles for medical research involving humans, including research on identifiable human material and data.

While the Declaration primarily addressed physicians, anyone conducting research involving humans is encouraged to adopt these principles. Albeit the principles of the declaration are straightforward. However, the reality of its practical application is not. Hence the theoretical and practical boundaries of ethical, moral, and legal scrutiny remain subjective.

Even the legal aspects may vary from one country to another. Research on genetically modified organisms and human cloning are the best examples that are not equally "legal" in all countries.

At the same time, how the moral and ethical boundary is determined may vary from different views namely deontological, utilitarian, or moral scrutiny.

From a deontological perspective, an action is either ethical or not ethical without exception. A utilitarian view is based on the balance of the consequences and benefits for a community, society, or nation. However, a sceptical or relativist view (moral scrutiny) stands on standards that are not universal but relative to a particular culture and time.

Surely, the views to determine the ethical or moral boundary of research are not limited to the above three views. In fact, it may raise an enduring debate to resolve the very fundamental question – if the ethical or moral aspects can be used interchangeably – in preparing guidelines to conduct and conclude a research. Or whether those ethical and moral aspects are limited to research dealing with humans and animals only.

The debate may also bring a topic as trivial as if humans who are pivotal in providing data in research should be considered and regarded as "subjects" or "participants". Then it may go beyond the scope of how to deal with them during the research.

The current ethical and moral principles ensure every possible protection of the participants in the research. However, it rarely looks beyond the boundaries of the participants.

Credit sharing among the co-researchers is often ignored which in the end may give rise to ethical dilemmas too. At least seldom, if not more often, principal researchers all of a sudden add more researchers to the team without consulting the rest of the group. In case a research is pursued by a student for an academic degree, a new co-supervisor pops up even after finalization of the research design or conducting most of the experiments. Often their participation is neither required nor justified.

Undoubtedly, the credibility of a researcher of a given research project is part of the evaluation of IRB. Then monitoring how, when, and why a new co-researcher could join an ongoing project should be evaluated too.

It is not unlikely that adding more coresearchers or co-supervisors could be justified within the legal aspects of the ethical boundary. However, from a moral perspective taking credit for what someone does not deserve will remain between the lines of the ethical principles that appear in black and white.

In academia, research output in the form of publications is set as their performance indicator and evaluated in awarding the degree. Sadly, result fabrication and other forms of research misconduct marred thousands of research publications fated in retraction. Both students and supervisors were found guilty of such research misconduct.

Indeed, it is beyond the scope of the current IRB evaluation process to monitor research misconduct and is mostly addressed by the relevant authority dealing with integrity. However, it is not beyond the scope of the IRB evaluation of a research proposal to ask for a pledge from the researchers that they will conduct and conclude the research by upholding the ethical and moral spirit.

If it is not meant to eliminate any potential research misconduct, the pledge would remind the researchers that the ethical and moral compass in research is not limited to the protection of human participants.

1.17. Look beyond Cikgu Yatt's seemingly harsh reprimand

New Straits Times. 2024 Jul 01
The Sun. 2024 Jul 03
Apa Khabar TV. 2024 Jul 06

WHEN Cikgu Yatt said in her TikTok video, "I know why you didn't finish your work... because you know the teacher won't punish, hit or scold you harshly like before", I felt a need to look deeper into her words.

The viral video was marked by the New Straits Times on June 29, 2024. I am confident that her intention was not to punish her students but to make them do their homework, that is, learn what they should learn.

Many of our colleagues in academia who were students 30 to 40 years ago would agree that during our time, we never felt traumatised or upset if we were beaten or scolded by our teachers.

"Getting punished was normal," said one of those who commented on the video. In fact, beating or scolding made us stronger to strive to improve ourselves, albeit with a few exceptions.

To Cikgu Yatt, students who didn't complete their homework lack respect and have lost their sense of shame. To many others, students now seem to be more emotionally "vulnerable".

The trend of such vulnerability seems to continue at the university level. Even postgraduate students feel traumatised if their supervisors are harsh in their criticism.

Students are terrified to have their draft thesis edited by supervisors with numerous corrections and harsh comments.

During viva voce, it is a trend that an examiner starts by commenting on the student's "good job" and "hard work". Well, they are expected to do a good job and are supposed to work hard.

Many students expect to be motivated (pampered!) before they start their viva, or else they feel vulnerable.

It is not during the viva voce that an examiner ought to acknowledge the students' performance. The viva voce is meant to examine what they have learned and what they haven't.

If the student needs to be praised, that could be reflected in the grades the examiners give or, at best, in the congratulatory notes after the session.

More importantly, the examiner might not have the same tone of acknowledgment for all students attending viva at the same session, making room for obvious bias and discrimination.

Indeed, the students need to be motivated and encouraged, and at the same time, we also need to know who is emotionally stable and resilient.

For teaching and learning, we seem to have adapted methodologies that do not make the students of the current generation perform better than us as we did during our time — a common agreement among many of us working in academia.

We fix learning times and learning objectives for all our students taking a course. It was a norm that our lecturers asked us questions beyond the topics they taught us — to test if we were interested in learning more.

This is how they could screen out the best of the best among us.

We are also forced to prepare questions with a given set of verbs from Bloom's Taxonomy that match a table of learning hierarchy — without knowing what that taxonomy was proposed for.

Meanwhile, we don't restrict students' access to screen time, rather, we encourage them to become increasingly dependent on screen learning.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that a lifestyle with increased screen time has an irreversible impact on our health — that it makes us vulnerable to epigenetic changes — changes that are not related to inherited genetic changes.

The majority of the diseases linked to epigenetic changes have a common symptom — intellectual disability.

From the primary to the tertiary level, we are preparing a future generation that is not only emotionally weak but also lacks depth of knowledge and vision.

Perhaps that's what we want, and that would justify our venture towards a digital world, where the human workforce will be gradually replaced by more artificially intelligent machines.

1.18. AI will never be the same as humans

Free Malaysia Today. 2024 Jun 23

Only two decades ago, artificial general intelligence (AGI) was no less than science fiction. Large language models (LLM) can now generate “tools” or “intelligent machines” that are more than just driving cars without going for a driving lesson or acting based on prediction or extended imagination.

Not to mention, people enjoy meaningful conversations with intelligent, empathic AI, which can express hopes and dreams and help people work through difficult emotional challenges.

It’s no surprise that people, who do not know how an AI is built or how an AI works, are pounded with questions in their minds. Can AI solve the climate crisis, predict the emergence of another pandemic, diagnose diseases like cancer early, predict famine in Africa, or give a solution to our quest for education for all? Or, will AI determine whether China or the US will dominate the world?

While we are asking those questions, we have already sensitised to the possibility of AI replacing many more human jobs in the near future than we are predicting today. Nevertheless, the biggest question comes to our mind: will AI one day start to control human beings? Or will there be a doomsday to shift global control from human to AI?

To many AI scientists and technologists, the answers to those questions depend on how humans would let AI grow and develop.

To Mustafa Suleyman (a British AI entrepreneur, the CEO of Microsoft AI, and the co-founder and former head of applied AI at DeepMind) AI is more than a tool for “Homo technologicus”. Mustafa used the metaphor “digital species” to define AI, who will be more than a mechanistic assistant but will act as a confidant, friend, or colleague.

Wondering why would we choose an AI as our companion? Mustafa justified that an AI can consume more than eight trillion words in a single training compared to only 8 billion words that we consume if we read 24 hours a day for our entire life. While an average man can hardly remember one-tenth of those words, an AI will remember it all.

All in all, an AI has the enormous potential to have an almost perfect IQ and exceptional EQ.

This is exactly why we would want to have an AI as an intelligent companion who would provide the services of a lawyer, financial adviser, doctor, designer, and planner at the same time.

Then, Mustafa defied his own metaphor and went beyond to define AI as a “digital species” – simply because AI is not just another invention of Homo technologicus but AI itself is an infinite inventor.

To him, every bit of how we have evolved, changed, and created around us in our human world today – AI is not something outside of it. Rather it is the very opposite – it is the whole of everything that we have created. It is us.

Does it mean that AI will be the same as Homo sapiens? In many aspects of human attributes – it would – as Mustafa and many more AI technologists prefer to say so.

AI would not debate on who their creator is. On the contrary, humans build their worldviews on faith as believers or as atheists. They also change their worldview from an atheist to a believer and vice versa. But an AI will not need to debate on what worldview they would belong to. They will know their creator – Homo sapiens – unless they want to deny that.

Perhaps an AI would accurately predict if a Democrat or a Liberal would win a presidential race. But it would not debate on whether to support the Democratic candidate or the Liberal candidate based on a political worldview.

It may not be far from today that AI will generate original creative ideas without being explicitly trained on them. Hence, an AI would not only recreate Mona Lisa or a Weeping Woman, but also create some new original art. However, unlike an AI, Vinci or Picasso did not need any pre-coded programming to translate their skills and talents on the canvas.

Unlike us, an AI would not have to find an anti-ageing solution to enjoy immortality. No doubt materials wear and tear. But recreating the same AI in a nearly immortal material or semi-material body would take a few seconds or even shorter than that.

Again, an AI mother would not have to wait nine months to deliver a weak feeble baby as the next generation. In fact, an AI will be able to recreate itself or perhaps an advanced version of it in nine nanoseconds or less, granted its creators permit self-development, though not through reproduction.

Albeit a next-generation AI would be born with enormous intelligence and information coded into its memory. That would make them super-intelligent but not genius. In contrast, a weak feeble human baby may show talents like writing poems, drawing pictures, memorising thousands of words, or calculating complex math without any pre-coded programme in their brain. That makes a human baby naturally genius without a code beyond human comprehension.

We see an AI providing love and care in old homes, but an "old" AI may not need love and care after thousands of years of service at old AI homes. Humans have given immortality to an AI without knowing fully how the presence or absence of a "soul" can make a human die.

No matter how we want to define AI – as a tool, an intelligent machine, an intelligent companion, digital species, or even as us – an AI will never be the same as human beings.

Should we then treat AI more than a technological advancement? No doubt that most of mankind has no slightest idea of how an AI will work in the near future – but some of us know it well.

Surely, it is not an AI that is forcing us to develop the next generation of AI that could one day take control of human beings. On the other hand, it is some of us who have the talents and genius that can make a self-creating, self-programming AI that will technically be more powerful than humans.

Some of us might think that making powerful AI is the future to take control of humanity. But if AI becomes more powerful than humans, then AI will control all of us including those who would create them.

1.19. Religious discrimination in and outside the boundary of religion

Life News Agency. 2024 Jun 20

Discriminatory dealings of people of different religions have always been rampant in human society. The coexistence of people from two or more religions has never been easy throughout history. The conflict often goes beyond discrimination and evolves into violent riots and wars.

To name a few, the riots or wars in Bosnia Herzegovina (1992-1995), Gujarat (2002), Uyghur, and the ongoing genocide in Palestine are a testimony to this notion.

Seemingly, all religions share a similar worldview on the 'faith' in the existence of god, life hereafter, and angels. But, neither the belief of god in different religions are the same in form, function, and ability; nor the way life hereafter is perceived.

Differences in the notion of prophethood also exist in different religions. In Islam, prophets and messengers were human beings who were guided by divine commandments. If compared with other Abrahamic religions such as Christianity, Islam shares the view that Jesus Christ (Prophet Isa) is a Messenger and is no more or less than a human being. Most religions that are based on idol worship, however, do not have any human forms of prophets or messengers.

Does it make sense then to compare different religions to recognize which religion is better or superior than the others?

To answer that question, let us compare milk and milk-tea. Even though both of them fall into the same category of beverages and both of them have a common ingredient which is milk, those two drinks are not the same and comparable in the same scale. Because the purpose, composition, and effect of those two different drinks are completely different. Hence, there is no reason to scan for a comparative superiority.

Yet, what is more appalling, is the unprecedented intolerance based on the differences in religious creeds. People around the world are divided as they are enraptured by their orthodox perception of their creeds in favor of their own religion or against other religion(s).

Perhaps humanity can take a lesson from the Noble Quran (Chapter 109, Verse 6), where Prophet Mohammad was asked to tell the people of other religions, "for you is your religion and for me is mine".

A logical deduction to this notion is that people of one religion should not interfere with the practice of the people of another religion. And no one should impose their religion onto others. At the same time, people who do not practice any religion also should be careful about commenting on the practice of others.

The discriminatory views and practices of the fanatic followers of a religion and non-religious fanatics are the worst of all. They would want to impose their version of their faith or creed – to or not to believe in a religion – on others. Needless to say, both religious fanatics and non-religious fanatics do the same damage to society.

Besides, there are others (mostly politicians) who tend to exploit religious issues to satisfy their own needs and greed. They would make pacts with the people of different religions to achieve their common cause. Then they'd split up if they think that the pacts do not serve their purpose. They would not then hesitate to make a different pact with the people of other religions. It is baffling to observe such "pacting" and "depacting" using religion as bait that does more harm than benefit to mankind.

Anyone has the right to share their thoughts to promote peace and harmony from their perspective – as long as it is meant for peace and harmony. With my faith in Islam, I am sharing mine.

Allah created mankind with diversity so that they can understand each other. In His sight, the most noble ones are those who are the righteous ones (Chapter 49, Verse 13). In fact, the diversity is meant to test the commitment to the law and path He gave mankind to lead their life (Chapter 5, Verse 48).

Clearly, those differences in diversity are not meant to judge anyone's superiority over others. Differences in race, color, ethnicity, or socio-economic status do not add anything to the righteousness He would judge.

Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) reiterated in his last sermon by saying that an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; also a White has no superiority over a Black nor does a Black have any superiority over a White except by piety and good deed.

Even as tiny as ridicule or insult on an individual scale is forbidden in Islam. Perhaps a reminder from the Noble Quran might be helpful: "O you who have believed, let not a people ridicule [another] people; perhaps they may be better than them; nor let women ridicule [other] women; perhaps they may be better than them. And do not insult one another and do not call each other by [offensive] nicknames. Wretched is the name of disobedience after [one's] faith. And whoever does not repent – then it is those who are the wrongdoers (Chapter 49, Verse 11)."

Nevertheless, Muslims can be deceitful in observing the teachings of Islam. Their humiliating discriminatory dealings with those who are perceived as inferior in race, color, ethnic origin, or socio-economic status is not invisible. Legal and social priorities depend on the racial, color, ethnic, or socio-economic status of an individual is common in many Muslim majority countries.

It is more ironic when Muslims from different madhabs (schools of thought) discriminate against each other based on their perception that a certain madhab is superior to the other. Some consider their madhab to be the closest, among the four, in terms of the practice of Prophet Mohammad such as how they perform daily prayers.

Such appalling discriminatory malaise seems to be an epidemic in the Muslim world! Despite being reprimanded repeatedly in the Noble Quran to remain united, rifts among the Muslim ummah (meant to be a single nation in Islam) are obvious among many Muslim nations. Discriminatory gimmick is at the root of such rifts. Not unsurprisingly, that rift weakens the strength of the ummah which otherwise could be to speak for their rights to practice their religion.

Sadly, some Muslims play giddy goat to discriminate against non-Muslims too. For instance, the rights of obligatory or optional charity for needy non-muslim neighbors are often ignored or even seen as prohibited.

It is interesting to see how fanatic atheists often fail, intentionally or unintentionally, to see the good side of a religion or the good people of a religion. Those fanatic atheists use their discriminatory views to condemn a religion mostly because they believe that there is no god and there should not be any religion. Without having any proper knowledge about the actual teaching of any religion, most fanatic atheists seem to spit out loathsome accusations against a religion.

For one or another reason, people with fundamental differences in their faiths as well as religious fanaticism or fanatic atheism will continue to exist. But does it mean that people of one faith must deal with people of another religion discriminately?

A human being, irrespective of his or her faith, can be treated justly as long as their human needs are concerned. Whether or not one faith is better than the other; or who will end up in paradise or who will enter hell; let it be decided by Him, who created paradise and hell.

1.20. Stop 'human trafficking' for your own sake

Free Malaysia Today. 2024 Jun 03
The Malaysian Insight. 2024 Jun 04

Hundreds and thousands of workers from Bangladesh felt lucky to cross immigration at KLIA before May 31, though many of them later discovered they failed to get the dream jobs in Malaysia that they had been promised.

Now, they are in hiding or could be left stranded for months in different places in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, to catch the May 31 deadline to come to Malaysia, thousands more of these workers have remained stranded at KLIA, with no trace of either their employers or their agents.

At the same time, more than 15,000 were stranded at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) and failed to board their flights. The majority of them had been given fake tickets.

Needless to say, each of those who are stranded at different spots in their fairy tale journey had spent all the resources they had. On average, they spent not less than RM20,000 to RM25,000. Despite paying at least five times more than the actual cost, they are bound to return home empty-handed.

Meanwhile, the stranded workers' entire hard-earned or inherited funds made the "authorised" dealers and agents responsible for hiring foreign workers awfully rich.

Once again, the story of these stranded workers went beyond the deep "concerns" of both Bangladeshi and Malaysian policymakers. None of those incidents happened by accident.

The story behind those stranded workers lies with the well-known organised fraud that continues unabated. There seems to always be an active hunting down of the culprit behind the fraud.

More often than not, instead of catching the perpetrators and bringing them to justice, the stranded workers become the victims of the legal hunting.

Jail, deportation, and monetary penalty, the stranded workers undoubtedly deserve it all for their share of the criminal act — being willing to bribe their way into Malaysia. They should have known the potential predicament in their venture.

Nonetheless, as usual, two other groups of people who are more, if not equally responsible for the crime, will largely remain untouched.

Such a syndicate cannot run without the involvement of government officials from both countries who have the official responsibilities to oversee the sending or recruiting of foreign workers.

At the centre of such crime syndicates, there has always been an open secret – the presence of authorised companies and agents who directly or indirectly deal with potential foreign workers.

The story of the predicament of foreign workers will continue as long as a handful of people, both in Bangladesh and Malaysia, continue to make their fortunes and enrich themselves at the expense of these workers.

Here, the stranded foreign workers are not the only losers. The rakyat too pays a toll.

Malaysia's good name as a respectable nation is in jeopardy, for at least two reasons – gaining "fame" for human trafficking through modern slavery, and emboldening crimes by the stranded foreign workers.

If not for the sake of those who became victims of their dreams of working in Malaysia, wouldn't you want to stop those criminals for your own sake?

1.21. Stop 'scienocide' by injecting more passion into scientific ventures

Malay Mail. 2024 May 14
New Straits Times. 2024 May 14

IDENTIFYING scientific misconduct as a "pandemic" would not be an exaggeration in the current academic world. Indeed, the regular news headlines of retractions for one or another form of scientific misconduct would endorse such an impression.

There are more than 46,000 retractions in The Retraction Watch Database — which is now part of Crossref — and the number is growing daily.

The Retraction Watch Leaderboard keeps an updated list of authors with the highest number of retracted papers. An additional list shows how many times retracted papers were cited before and even after those were retracted.

Surely, those numbers reflect the widespread scientific misconduct but perhaps they do not represent the actual magnitude of the pandemic. Reading between the lines of the retraction headlines and those numbers exposes rather a scary sketch of the future of the scientific venture.

Enough of the discussions that were made to identify the reason behind the scientific misconduct practice! No other than the "publish-or-perish" policy has been named as the number one culprit.

However, the impact of those retractions on the pursuit of science is more than just the number of retracted papers or the number of citations of those retracted papers received. Many of those authors on the list of the Retraction Watch Leaderboard could be seen as prolific scientists in their fields.

At the same time, the content of the highly cited retracted papers might have been established as acceptable scientific evidence, which in reality was fabricated or fraudulent.

Both those authors and their retracted papers have misled hundreds of researchers who followed nothing less than fabricated scientific doctrine. That means a fabricated science was repeated hundreds of times.

Could those researchers have found different results in the research they conducted, but were persuaded to publish their research in line with those doctrines that were eventually retracted?

Did that repetition make the fabricated science the "true" science? Well, the infamous law of propaganda attributed to the Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels says so, "Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth." Or rather, an illusion of truth.

Say, an observation based on fabricated results was established through a publication. Being fascinated by the observation, other researchers also published papers to support similar observations. A few years later if the first observation is retracted due to the fabricated results it was based upon, what should be the fate of the subsequent supporting observations?

In reality, scientific misconducts either perpetuate the science of lies or give birth to prolific pseudoscientists. In the end, neither of them does any good to humanity.

The controversial diet-heart hypothesis is one such example where "science" led humanity in the wrong direction yet gave unprecedented fame to the proponent of the hypothesis. By carefully selecting the most graphically convincing pieces of information, Ancel Keys, better known as Mr Cholesterol, proposed his controversial diet-heart hypothesis in the 1950s.

Later he was not only accused of copying the ideas of Dr John Gofman and his colleagues to propose the hypothesis, but also for his denial to accept the flaws in the results he published.

Keys was also accused of hiding additional findings that were completed at a later stage of his research and that had contradicted his initial publications. Because of his publications and his interview with Time magazine in 1961, millions of people around the world harmed their health by increasing the probability of developing coronary heart disease and a shortened life expectancy.

To cut a long story short, let us ask the question: why do scientists like Keys pursue science that is not only wrong but also harmful to mankind?

It is not unlikely that they are persuaded by their whim for fame or to some extent their survival in an academic job market that demands the "number" of papers on their CV.

With the examples of Keys and many others, we have experienced how scientific misconduct and prolific pseudoscientists are causing a massive scienocide - i.e., killing science that in turn kills humanity. Scienocide must be stopped and the only way to do it is to bring back the soul in scientific ventures.

Let the academics and scientists grow their love and passion for science and stop persuading them to race for a higher number of publications for the purpose of job hunting or promotion.

At the root of it, it is the responsibility of every supervisor of a research project or a research student to check if the work they want to publish is authentic and reliable.

Perhaps this is the very first step to bringing back the soul in a scientific venture and putting a stop to scienocide.

1.22. No one has any right to offend others' religion

Bebas News. 2024 Mar 21
Life News Agency. 2024 Mar 21

The world has witnessed episodes of burning the Noble Quran, making caricatures of Prophet Mohammad, and above all labelling Islam as a religion of terrorism.

Only a few days ago a policeman was kicking Muslims praying Jumaa by the roadside in Delhi. Students who were praying Tarabi (prayer during the fasting month) were attacked in a university hostel in Gujrat. The predicaments of Muslims in Myanmar, Uyghur, Gaza, and many other places did not go unnoticed. What did they all do to be tortured, expelled from their lands, or murdered?

And now, socks allegedly made in China that are printed with “Allah” have reached KK Mart’s shelves in Malaysia for sale. Albeit it is not a “controversial” issue as the Star (20 March 2024) labelled it.

Rightly so, His Majesty Sultan Ibrahim, King of Malaysia, called for stern action to be taken by the authorities against those responsible. His Majesty wrote on his FaceBook on 19 March 2024 “Whether this was intentional or otherwise, whether the socks were imported or produced by local factories, I want the authorities to investigate and take stern action in accordance with the law so that such matters are not repeated.”

While the KK Mart’s authority apologized – many unresolved questions remain.

Putting those events in plain words raises a simple question – why do people go so readily and easily against Islam and its followers? Are those only a few sporadic mistakes or misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims?

Islam or its followers are not taken mistakenly by all non-Muslims in India, China, Israel, Myanmar, and the rest of the world. Yet, those incidents do not sound like sporadic events that erupted overnight.

Theologically, one might find the root of all those so-called mistakes or misunderstandings lies with the creation of mankind – as the Noble Quran describes the refusal of Iblis to bow down to Adam (may Allah be pleased with him). Instead, Iblis declared to mislead Prophet Adam and his descendants – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – from their front, their back, their right, and their left (The Noble Quran, 7:11-17).

Iblis not only promised to mislead men to stay away from worshiping Allah but also spread corruption and mischief on Earth. Ironically, it is both Muslims and non-Muslims who might have their fair share – following the footsteps of Iblis – in spreading corruption and mischief on Earth.

Albeit, neither Allah does force anyone to embrace Islam nor Muslims are asked to force anyone to do the same. In other words, there is no compulsion in religion (The Noble Quran, 2:256). Besides, Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) by the command of Allah said, “For you is your religion, and for me is my religion” (The Noble Quran,109:6).

Hence, whether anyone wants to embrace Islam – it is their choice. But it is not a choice that anyone can mock, ridicule, or condemn the religion of others. Yet it happens – it happens more often than seldom. And it is Islam and Muslims that come to the forefront of that resentment.

In the end, such corruption and mischief go beyond a sporadic event. Those become political issues. On either side of such an issue, there are politicians who want to achieve their political mileage either by creating or by using the resulting predicaments.

Thus those sporadic mistakes become part of a regional or even a “global” political game. Not unlikely – that game helps to lead (read control) people in a group, a state, or the world. In the current world, that game of control for regional or geo-political dominance is an open secret.

Ironically, despite having the democratic principle as a universal norm in politics, there seems no universal norm in politics to inherit that dominance. Searching for a universal set of values in that race for dominance is rather foolish where vulnerable groups become easy prey.

However, it is a civilized expectation that no one has any right to offend others' religion be it planned or accidental. Hence, it is more than a democratic right of Muslims that their faith and rituals need to be allowed and respected.

No doubt, following the footsteps of Iblis to spread corruption and mischief could be politically enjoyable for the time being but the intolerance that it incubates against each other is detrimental to the democratic commitment of any civilized nation.

1.23. Charging Authors For Scientific Publishing Is Fundamentally Flawed

Business Today. 2024 Feb 26
Life News Agency. 2024 Feb 26

The concept of the so-called open science, in which research publications are made publicly accessible free of cost, seems to have good intentions. In principle, open access seems like a noble idea. It is not free after all. Someone is held responsible for paying the cost that makes the scientific publications free en masse. And that is by default the people behind the research – the academics and scientists who are the authors of publications.

Authors are responsible for securing research grants, conducting the research, and finally publishing the research findings. A research output, however, in the form of publications does not necessarily always come from research funded by an institution, industry, or government. Academics and scientists do voluntary research without any grants that are also published.

Either way, there are expenses for the editorial processing of a manuscript in the labor room of a publisher. With some exceptions, the expenses for the article processing, nowadays mostly open access fees, are covered by institutional funds, research grants, or by the researcher's personal fund.

Without going into a deeper discussion, realizing that institutional funds and government research grants are mostly taxpayers' money is not difficult. A part of people's tax money is used by government or public institutions and is disbursed in the form of research grants. Industrial and private funds are also dependent in one way or another on the taxpayers' contribution- at least partially. Industries spending money on R&D are partly exempted from tax.

Ironically, the same taxpayers are not eligible to read the outputs of the research they paid for. On the other hand, the authors, who also pay taxes, are held responsible for the research from A to Z which includes writing the proposal, conducting the research, and drafting the manuscript have to pay a publisher to make their research outputs accessible to those who paid for their research.

The arguments by the publishers are simple and straightforward. They need money to shoulder the cost of the publication process of papers. Given the wide range of open access fees that in some cases exceed USD10,000.00, it is difficult to fathom the actual costs that a publisher shoulders to make a paper accessible to the world. The inevitable question that could be raised is whether the publisher charges more than it costs.

Curtly put, the publication business is not a philanthropic mission! Nevertheless, some publishers exempt authors from countries with low-income brackets from paying the article processing or open access fees. At the same time, other publishers follow hybrid publishing models whereby papers are either openly accessible or accessible upon subscription by the readers.

Besides, the hybrid model of open access options, some countries such as South Africa, and a few countries in Latin America and Europe opted for the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) network that allows the publishing of research from member countries under the diamond open access model where both publishing and reader access come at no cost. The goal is to publish research by local researchers for local researchers and on locally relevant topics.

Needless to say, SciELO or any similar models are limited to those countries participating in those models and to a limited number of journals too. Besides, an expansion of such models at a global scale is not logistically achievable.

Overall, the open-access publication models create one or another form of inequity in the papers published. This becomes further complicated in certain situations where authors in the byline may come from countries that are exempted from paying the open-access fees and also from countries that are not exempted from paying the same fees.

Furthermore, how will a journal entertain a paper of voluntary research that is conducted without any grant? If the authors come from countries that are not on the open-access exemption list, they ought to pay the fees from their own salary.

The number of journals to submit manuscripts without any clause of payment is shrinking. Strikingly, journals from reputed publishers or those who are listed in reputed indexing bodies are “licensed” to impose any open-access fees they deem fit for their journal. The higher the reputation, the higher the fees.

It is rather baffling to see that neither there is a universal norm to determine the open access fees nor any guidelines that could cover every logical aspect of charging an author to pay the open access fees. Not to mention, the “pay and publish” based predatory journals continue operating without any major hassle.

In such a predicament, instead of forcing academics and researchers to show their publication productivity by paying often a very unreasonable amount, academic and research institutions should find alternative means to evaluate the performance and impact of their staff. Measuring the societal impact of a researcher’s work and its influence on local policy could be an alternative means for evaluating research performance.

It is unpredictable if the international community of scientific publications would devise any acceptable guidelines for open access fees or if the academic and research institutions will adopt any alternative means to release the burden on the authors for the open access fees. Until then charging authors for open access fees will continue to run with the fundamental flaws in the practice.

1.24. Should we penalise scientific misconduct in rankings scores?

University World News. 2024 Feb 24

The concept of the so-called open science, in which research publications are made publicly accessible free of cost, seems to have good intentions. In principle, open access seems like a noble idea. It is not free after all. Someone is held responsible for paying the cost that makes the scientific publications free en masse. And that is by default the people behind the research – the academics and scientists who are the authors of publications.

Although global university rankings are very popular, they are not immune from criticism. While the rankings can be meaningfully used by institutions to plan further improvements, the problem lies with the intended use of the rankings merely for branding to attract more students. The lack of a tool that measures the holistic performance of a university is also an issue.

In fact, academic and research institutions have always been ranked. Being able to name the best university in the world – Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge or MIT – was never a problem, with or without the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) or Times Higher Education (THE) global university rankings.

But it is indeed unacceptable if those rankings are used merely for 'branding' purposes while ignoring the importance and impact universities have as the highest seats of learning in fostering knowledge and wisdom as well as their adherence to ethical practices.

Nonetheless, the 'shallow' view of rankings seems to have its advantages. Hence, despite the non-stop censure of the methodological issues behind the rankings, academic institutions are tempted to secure a higher position in them.

Consequently, a large number of universities in the world participate in rankings every year. Ranking bodies such as QS and THE use more or less similar quantitative indicators: reputation in teaching, academic staff-student ratio, doctoral-bachelor student ratio, number and citation counts of papers published by staff, the proportion of international staff and students, international collaboration and knowledge transfer for industrial or societal application.

The indicators QS or THE use provide scores in selected quantifiable criteria – omitting the qualitative, unseen worldview of many universities whose context is different from those who mastermind the highly regarded international league tables. At the end of the evaluation, each university earns a score based on its performance in those selected indicators.

Pressure to publish

At the bottom of the chain of the ranking race, academics are inspired (read forced) to increase their research productivity, mainly in terms of publications and citations. To some extent, racing for higher numbers of publications and citations is proven to compromise the authenticity and integrity of academic practices.

Recently academics were shocked by the news that there were more than 10,000 retractions in the year 2023, with various forms of scientific misconduct, including compromised peer review, being the cause.

Added to that was the recent revelation of anomalous trends of self-citation that are used by many academics to boost their reputation with regard to research impact.

Curing 'like with like'

Adopting an effective means to curb these unethical practices in the academic and scientific world has become more urgent than ever before. To identify an effective means, we may want to borrow the phrase coined by Dr Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy: Similia similibus curantur, which in English means 'like is cured by like'.

While the ‘temptation’ for a higher ranking works as a gas pedal that can encourage academics to resort to unethical means to increase the number of publications and citations they have, a brake pedal could also be applied through penalising unethical behaviour and might help to put a check and balance in the rankings race.

In other words, a measure to assign negative scoring for the activities that affect the authentic pursuit of science and knowledge could also be counted in the global university rankings. More specifically, when a university is credited for its number of publications it should be discredited for any papers bearing an affiliation with it that are retracted for scientific misconduct. Similarly, the number of anomalous self-citations could also be used in the scoring system.

Such a measure would make policy-makers think twice about pushing researchers’ backs against the wall in the hunt for an increased number of publications and citations.

Rebuilding trust

The exact mechanism and standards needed to adopt such negative scoring might need careful consideration of many factors, such as a database that could be used to extract the information on retractions or self-citations. At the same time, the weightage of negative scoring for such negative indicators would also need careful evaluation.

I believe these challenges are fairly easy to resolve. For instance, rankings bodies can work with Retraction Watch.

For the weightage of negative scoring, a consensus might be needed, but that is not impossible. Rankings bodies have different weightage for different indicators and a similar system could be applied for negative scoring too. The issue is whether rankings bodies would be willing to do this.

In my view, the sooner the better when it comes to addressing the Wild West of scientific misconduct. It is important to reiterate that scientific misconduct not only destroys people’s trust in science, but also kills the spirit and essence of the authentic pursuit of science.

1.25. No more metals in your mouth *[with Noor Azlin Yahya]*

Malay Mail. 2024 Jan 27
Life News Agency. 2024 Jan 27

Remember the story of the Six Million Dollar Man? Fatally injured pilot Steve Austin after an airplane crash was rebuilt with metallic implants which made him a superhuman with bionic abilities. The cost was six million dollars — hence the name.

With or without a plane crash, we often damage or lose our teeth and opt for rebuilding. Dentists call it “dental restoration” where a damaged tooth is repaired, or a missing tooth is replaced. For the restoration, they use metals and a few other materials — expected to be biocompatible and nontoxic to our health.

Although dental restoration cannot make a bionic tooth, but it can give a normal functioning bite. After restoration, the tooth at best will look, feel, and work like a natural one and provide the ability not for a bionic but a normal bite.

Dental restoration relies heavily on metals, often precious ones. Depending on the money one can spend and the scope of the restoration some could have a partially golden tooth. Various metals and their alloys are used for the filling of cavities and the construction of orthodontic appliances, crowns, bridges, and partials.

In dentistry, amalgam is a liquid mercury and metal alloy mixture that is used to fill cavities caused by tooth decay. An amalgam is a mixture of liquid mercury and a combination of other metals. Metals such as chromium, nickel, cobalt, silver, gold, titanium, tin, and zinc are commonly used in dental restorations alongside mercury.

Despite its history dating back to the Tang dynasty medical text written by Su Gong in 659, amalgam became the dental restorative material of choice due to its low cost, ease of application, strength, and durability since the 1800s.

The mercury content in dental amalgam has been a source of recurrent controversies due to its potentially toxic effects on human health. The awareness of health hazards caused by the release of mercury from dental amalgam has become common knowledge. Some of the attributed health issues include, but are not limited to, autism, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, as well as symptoms like depression, insomnia, irritability, mental instability, and anxiety associated with mercury exposure.

Besides, electrolytes, i.e., minerals that carry charges such as sodium, potassium, and chloride in saliva, exert a battery effect between two or more dissimilar metals that are present in amalgam and cause an electrical current known as oral galvanism. Oral galvanism can lead to various sensations such as metallic or salty taste, burning or tingling of the tongue, increased salivary flow, visible changes to the oral mucosa, occasional nerve shock or nerve sensitivity when touching the restoration with a metal utensil, or generalised discomfort in the mouth including trigeminal neuralgia.

In 2013, the Minamata Convention on Mercury adopted policies to protect human health and the environment from anthropogenic emissions and releases of mercury. The Convention recommended phase-down mercury-containing amalgam use. The initial roadmap to phase down dental amalgam involves a strategic shift towards more environmentally friendly and health-conscious alternatives.

As stipulated during the Minamata Convention, the manufacture and import of amalgam shall cease by 2027. However, the EU Member States proposed to make the deadline earlier by 2024. Despite holding up with the Minamata Convention on Mercury, the Malaysian Dental Council supports the use of dental amalgam usage until an alternative material that matches or exceeds all the characteristics of dental amalgam becomes available.

To successfully phase down dental amalgam, there must be a greater emphasis, increased research on amalgam alternatives, and best management practices for amalgam waste.

Alternatives of dental amalgam, in other words, making a metal-free dentistry are gaining traction. Biocompatible ceramic, zirconia, and composite resins are being used as amalgam alternatives.

If you need to have a dental restoration, you should ask for a metal-free product. However, if you already have metal dental restorations in your mouth, find an expert opinion for as safe removal of these metal dental restorations.

1.26. Longing for a longer life!

Business Today. 2024 Jan 26
Focus Malaysia. 2024 Jan 27
Life News Agency. 2024 Jan 27

In 1998 WHO predicted that the number of people aged 65+ years would be 800 million by 2025. The prediction is coming true. In 2022, there were 771 million people aged 65+ years globally, accounting for almost 10% of the world's population, and is expected to hit 16% in 2050. The share of the Malaysian population aged 65+ years crossed 7% in 2022.

The quest to defy death and aging has captivated humanity for centuries. We yearn for a longer yet youthful life. Tons of anti-aging research, success in cloning, and the ability to attach human senses, memories, and emotions to robots have made that longing much closer than ever before.

At the same time, AI-driven robots are expected sooner or later to replace the human workforce in many industries. When AI-driven robots are capable of sweeping our homes, driving cars, giving lectures, writing research proposals, operating production lines, or performing critical surgery – what else will be left for us to do?

Yet we want to live longer! What exactly is our target?

Albeit, nations that are helmsmen of technological advancement to bring humanity to the pinnacle of civilization are struggling with an aging society.

An article by Ronald Lee and Andrew Mason published in 2017 (available on the IMF website) clearly stated "As populations in richer nations get older, GDP growth slows, support costs rise, and government budgets feel pressure." A recent research in Malaysia estimated that a 1% increase in old age dependency will decline GDP growth by an average of 6.6%.

Concerns revolving around aged populations are beyond the economic burden.

A 2017 review of 52 studies in 28 countries from diverse regions estimated that over the past year, 1 in 6 people (15.7%) aged 60 years and older were subjected to some form of abuse.

In 2021 at least one elderly person was killed every eight days in Japan by those who otherwise have the moral obligation to provide love and care for their aged parents, grandparents, or relatives.

Sadly, in the brute reality of the stressful lifestyle of the modern days, the elderly become a burden – hence the so-called "caregiver fatigue" coerced the younger relatives to abuse or murder the elderly.

According to WHO, more than 80% of the global COVID–19–related deaths between 2020 and 2021 occurred among people aged 60 years or older. Whether elderly COVID-19 patients were refused ICU care was much debated too.

Here lies the paradox of the motto of civilization – a long healthy and prosperous life! Those who are living longer become feeble and dependent more on healthcare facilities. They are also considered stumbling blocks to economic prosperity. More so is the predicament of an insane society where elderly people are being abused or murdered by those who otherwise must take care of them.

What would be the meaning then of the pinnacle of technological advancement and economic prosperity in an insane society where the aged population will gradually increase? A question that needs an answer more urgently than our quest to halt aging or our venture to settle in Mars.

Finding that answer would be more helpful to find a more pragmatic approach to a sustainable human civilization.

Japanese people who are unique in their polite and kind behavior are failing to take care of their loved elderly ones. It is not because they have become rude or cruel – but it is because they are broken with the pressure of taking care of the elderly.

Taro Aso, the then-finance minister in Japan in 2013 uncouthly said that the elderly should be allowed to “hurry up and die.”

Will the rest of the world’s populations be different in facing a similar burden?

Cultural and ritual killing of the old aged, i.e., senicide better known as “geronticide” is not an alien concept in human society. The active or passive killing of the elderly by senio-euthanasia or altruistic self-sacrifice has been in practice to relieve the clan, family, or society from the burden of a “useless eater”.

In the distant past in Japan, an infirm or elderly relative was carried to a mountain, or some other remote, desolate place, and left there to die – a practice known as “ubasute” (abandoning an old woman).

Why does such an insane practice have to come back? Are we not missing something amidst our quest for technological advancement and economic prosperity, and longing for a longer life?

1.27. Six proposals to boost quality of varsity research output

New Straits Times. 2024 Jan 24

According to a 2014 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation report, higher education and research policies in Malaysia emphasised global university rankings that entailed an increased publication rate.

Consequently, university faculty members were pressured to publish in top-tier international journals. It could be noted that the National Higher Education Action Plan 2011-2015 devised a strategy to achieve a world-class research university, too.

For such a university to be realised, the action plan calls for improving the quality of academic publications so that more staff achieve at least 100 indexed citations.

Here are a few considerations for policymakers to refresh action plans for sustainable quality research outputs in higher education institutions in Malaysia:

WE must not only consider the number of publications and citations, but also the role of the researcher in the publications i.e., as primary and/or principal (or corresponding) authors.

A MINIMUM two years of postdoctoral training should be required for an individual to qualify for a starting level university faculty position.

REVISIT the requirement for completing postgraduate training within a time frame with a strict number of publications. An unwritten obligation to pass anyone who enrols for such a degree should also be relooked.

At the same time, the requirement for completed postgraduate supervision should be revisited in the interest of quality research and supervision.

EVALUATION of academic and research staff based on the amount of the grants must be replaced with the ratio of grants to research outputs.

EXTENDING the time to complete a research funded by a grant must be on a case-by-case basis. However, failure to complete a project within the stipulated time does not mean research termination, and,

REVISIT performance indicators of the Malaysia Research Assessment (MyRA) ranking so that they align with global university ranking indicators.

1.28. ‘Success’ of Malaysian researchers is again under the spotlight / Quality first, please / Reset needed for sustainable, high-quality research outputs from Malaysian universities

Malay Mail. 2024 Jan 16
Business Today. 2024 Jan 16
Life News Agency. 2024 Jan 16
TwentyTwo 13. 2024 Jan 17
Apa Khabar TV. 2024 Jan 23

A Nature article published on 10 January 2024 referring to a study reported in Plos One in December 2023 articulates “Self-citations in around a dozen countries are unusually high”. The article continues to emphasize “Researchers behind the analysis think that policy incentives in these places are to blame”.

Using Scopus data, the study in Plos One evaluated the trends of country self-citations in 50 countries over the world in the period 1996-2019. While most countries’ country self-citations had a decreasing trend over time, 12 countries including Malaysia exhibited anomalous trends of self-citation.

During that period Scopus’s number of recorded publications for Malaysia is 310,874. The numbers for Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand are 292,723; 150,879; and 188,262 respectively. 35.5% of those published papers by Malaysian scientists are categorized as international publications, i.e. publications with authors from different countries. In that category, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand had their shares at 51.5%, 27.9%, and 39.6% respectively. Indeed, those numbers reflect the commitment of Malaysian researchers to pursue science.

Nevertheless, the accompanying “fames” for Malaysia as one of the top countries, with the highest number of retractions in 2023 and now with the highest number of self-citations was unexpected but not unanticipated.

According to a UNESCO report published in 2014, higher education and research policies in Malaysia emphasized global university rankings that needed an increased publication rate by the targeted universities. Consequently, those university faculty members were kept under pressure to publish in top-tier international journals.

It could be noted that the National Higher Education Action Plan 2011-2015 devised a strategy to achieve a world-class research university too. For such a university, an outcome indicator of an increased percentage of staff achieving at least 100 indexed citations was set under the action plan for improving the quality of faculty publications.

According to the study in Plos One, the upward trend of Malaysian country self-citations coincides with the years following this government intervention.

Arguably, the quality of a publication does not necessarily depend on the citations received by the paper. It was well evident that a good number of papers published in reputed journals were retracted for fraud or other forms of misconduct before those were cited hundreds of times.

Clearly, retractions and anomalous citations none of those are good news to sustain Malaysia as a regional higher education hub. Unfortunately, no “undo” button can erase those infamous records and Malaysian researchers cannot come out of it unscathed.

What if there is a “refresh” button to make a clean and prestigious future?

A reset at the higher education policy level to define quality and sustainable research to address the urgent needs to build a clean and prestigious future.

Here I dare to suggest a few considerations for the policymakers to ponder upon to refresh and reset their action plans for sustainable quality research outputs in higher educational institutions in Malaysia.

1. As long as publications are considered, appointment and promotion criteria must not consider merely the number of publications and citations but rather the role of the applicants in the publications i.e., as primary and/or principal (or corresponding) authors.

2. To have a qualified pool of researchers from the beginning of the newly appointed staff members, a minimum of two years of postdoctoral training should be used as the minimum requirement to appoint an individual at a starting level of university faculty positions.

3. The requirement for completing postgraduate in each time with strict requirements of publications and an "unwritten" obligation to pass anyone who enrols for such a degree must be revisited. At the same time, the requirement for completed postgraduate supervision should be revisited in the interest of quality research and supervision.

4. As far as the research grants are concerned, the current trend of evaluation of academic and research staff based on the amount of the grants must be replaced with the ratio of the amount of the grant and research outputs.

5. Extension of the time to complete a research grant must be based on the actual reasons and a case-by-case basis. Albeit there must be a given time frame to complete a research project however, it does not necessarily mean to terminate any project if failed to finish within the time as long as justified reasons are provided.

6. Performance indicators for MyRA ranking should be revisited to scale down many of those from obligatory to optional indicators and align those with global university ranking indicators.

1.29. Signs and science of happiness

Business Today. 2024 Jan 05
Life News Agency. 2024 Jan 05
Bebas News. 2024 Feb 13

Who does not want to be happy? However, the real challenge is to identify what makes one happy. Some are happy to make sacrifices and see others happy. Their happiness is rooted in their altruistic behavior. In contrast, others want to have pleasure and happiness for themselves – irrespective of anyone else being happy – a characteristic of hedonic behaviour.

Some want to be happy in this world and others patiently wait for eternal happiness in the life hereafter. For the latter group, happiness is more than a fleeting feeling or an ephemeral passion.

Aristotle, in the 4th century (BCE), propounded happiness as an "activity of the soul that expresses virtue." To him, happiness is the product of a life well lived, the summation of a full, flourishing existence, and sustained until the end to make "a complete life" – a life with purpose.

In its linguistic meaning, "happiness" is synonymous with the Greek word "eudaimonia" referring to a constellation of closely related terms such as lucky, blessed, and favored. In other languages too, happiness has an element of luck or fortune.

Despite this linguistic tenacity in its meaning to relate happiness and luck, most of us probably would disagree with the idea that happiness might lie in the roll of the dice. This is because our happiness depends on how we perceive success in our lives. Our success depends on how we treasure our ability to achieve success to acquire "fortune".

In the real world, however, many forms of fortunes are inherited rather than acquired.

No matter whether we inherit or acquire fortunes, the measure of success becomes the measure of satisfaction and eventually happiness. Our ability to control fortune for success then construes the central dogma of happiness.

The purpose of one's life determines how one will acquire or control one's fortune for an intended success. Some may want to acquire and indulge in their fortunes for their hedonic happiness and some may use it to enjoy altruistic happiness. Yet others would not correlate acquiring fortunes with happiness.

The subjectivity of the source of happiness affirms that happiness comes from within. For psychologists, happiness is inherently subjective and is not a static state. At times one may feel happy yet at other times they would feel blue. And even unhappy people would have their moments of joy. This may reflect the possibility of how they measure the reality of that moment for their ultimate purpose in life.

That makes sense perfectly. The Science of Happiness, an online course by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley helps to explore the roots of happiness – meaningful life. Dacher Keltner and Emiliana Simon-Thomas taught the course based on a fundamental finding from positive psychology: that happiness is inextricably linked to having strong social ties and contributing to something bigger than yourself—the greater good.

Many of the participants endorsed that it is not the fortunes that are needed to be happy in life.

With or without attending the course may we then search for happiness in our mind – in our sense of satisfaction – not in wealth.

1.30. Are we inherently racist? / We are not inherently racist, are we?

Malay Mail. 2024 Jan 19
Focus Malaysia. 2024 Jan 19
Business Today. 2024 Jan 19
Life News Agency. 2024 Jan 19
Bebas News. 2024 Jan 22
Asia News Today. 2024 Jan 21
Apa Khabar TV. 2024 Jan 26

As much as we want to think that all human beings are the same, the truth is that we are different. We differ in the way we think, work, live, and earn our livelihood. We also differ in terms of race, religion, gender, and skin colour. Unfortunately, we tend to make use of these differences to discriminate against each other.

Irrespective of how racism is defined, it can be typified by an act of discrimination, prejudice, or antagonism towards any individual or group that is branded as inferior. Logically, if the whole human race has one trait such as one complexion, one religion, or one social status, it is unlikely to envisage discrimination.

Often, discrimination in the name of distinguishing groups of people living in the same society is officially allowed and is not seen as an embarrassing suit of society – rather considered legal or commonsensical. In fact, the scope of discrimination follows the increasing number of different traits and attributes. Nationality is perhaps the biggest addition to that trend.

While we are fond of diagnosing those differences, we are also infatuated with categorizing ourselves as either superior or inferior using different traits and attributes and captivated by a perceived categorization of superiority or inferiority. In those dogmatic and bigotry contexts of a superiority complex, who is not a racist?

Needless to say, our perceived categorization is not universal. We use subjective and relative standards to categorize ourselves based on our desire and intent which makes our society full of different forms of discrimination! Arguably, this oversimplification is the biggest irony of modern human civilization which is an amplified furtherance of the past.

Nonetheless, the biggest question is why we discriminate against each other or act racist. Is racism inherent to the human race?

In line with the evidence presented by behavioural scientists or psychologists, it can be argued that humans by nature possess the quality of inherent or implicit bias, i.e., the inherent judgmental tendency to differentiate something as right or wrong, good or bad, and beautiful or ugly. But it does not mean that humans are inherently racist.

Inherent judgmental tendency helps to construct our cognitive filter for that differentiation. Logically, how the cognitive filter will be constructed depends on one's knowledge and experiences. Not to a shock though, two individuals who are educated and raised in the same way would construct different cognitive filters and, hence, perceive the same event or issue differently.

It is through the acquired cognitive filter we reorient our inherent judgmental tendency to come up with our cognitive interpretations to judge and categorize any trait and attribute subjectively.

Eventually, our subjective cognitive interpretation may work as the source of racial or discriminatory acts and attitudes, if not exercised justly.

Therefore, how one would construct cognitive filters to subsequently develop just or unjust cognitive interpretations is most likely to be acquired, rather than inherent. That gives the possibility that racism is acquired rather than an inherent trait of mankind – but that of course originates in our inherent judgmental tendency.

In fact, having this judgmental tendency is not only a part of human nature but is also important. Because, without that tendency, we would be unable to judge and categorize what is good or bad, right or wrong, and so on. Eventually, it would prevent us from achieving a higher level as a human being.

Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the potential of our inherent judgmental tendency. At the same time, it is also important to make appropriate exercises of our judgmental acumen using the acquired cognitive filter for just or rightful cognitive interpretations. Or else it would lead to racial or discriminatory havoc.

However, constructing the filter depends on more than what we know or what we experience – it depends on the worldview of our life.

To develop an appropriate cognitive filter, we ought to fix our worldview to identify the purpose of our very existence as a human race. That will allow us to evaluate or exercise our judgmental tendencies more objectively.

The truth is, as human beings, no one is perfect. Yet we have the responsibility to uphold the spirit of humanity and strive towards perfection. The purpose of being human is to achieve a level of superior human quality rather than just merely holding the perceived superior identity in terms of race, religion, socioeconomic status, or skin colour.

1.31. Missing target in the UN Developmental Goals / Shouldn't we add human-centric goals too?

Business Today. 2023 Dec 29
Life News Agency. 2023 Dec 29
Apa Khabar TV. 2024 Jan 05

Parallel to the unstoppable dynamics of civilization, global development follows UN developmental goals. At the beginning of the millennium, global leaders started working to achieve eight millennial developmental goals (MDGs).

In addition to achievements in access to drinking water, universal primary education, child and maternal health, gender equality, and eliminating hunger, the MDG 2015 report underscores the urgency of the post-2015 development agenda.

Hence, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) came into play as the core of the 2030 agenda with a blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development had an increased number of goals from eight goals in MDG to 17 goals in SDGs with more comprehensive targets. The SDGs were set with an urgent call for action by all countries – developed and developing – in a global partnership.

At the same time, SDGs' achievements also need partnership between countries. In reality, SDGs cannot be achieved by any agency or a country that works in silo. Furthermore, in some cases, there is a dependency on achieving a target of one SDG on that of a different SDG.

Indeed, the SDG blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet is comprehensive enough. Yet, one important current global public concern namely the psychological health of adolescence, adults, and the aged population seem to escape a direct reference in SDGs. Which on the other hand, might need more weightage to be dealt with in the post-pandemic era.

Lack of psychological well-being has become a global phenomenon which became worse during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The severity of this health concern in the post-pandemic era was unforeseen in 2015. Hence perhaps has not been identified as an independent target in SDG 3 or any other SDGs that were set in 2015.

SDG 3 addressing health and wellbeing aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all ages.

Rightly so, SDG 3 set nine targets: maternal mortality, neonatal and child mortality, infectious diseases, noncommunicable diseases, substance abuse, road traffic, sexual and reproductive health, universal health coverage, and environmental health.

According to the WHO Report 1998, the number of persons aged 65 years and above was about 390 million and was predicted to be 800 million by 2025. The same age group of population as of now has reached about a billion. A further prediction on the number of persons aged 80 years or over is projected to triple, from 143 million in 2019 to 426 million in 2050.

Taken together, an aged population will be a major concern in the future and that is inevitable due to the demographic transition towards longer lives and smaller families.

The aged population is not entirely left behind in SDGs. The World Social Report 2023 entitled, 'Leaving no one behind in an aging world,' by the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs recalls that the 2030 Agenda aims to leave no one behind, particularly the most vulnerable people, including those at older ages. Nevertheless, the psychological well-being of elderly populations is far from a satisfactory level.

On one hand, we are expecting a shift away from a focus on economic value towards a human-centric society, where societal value and well-being remain at the core of IR 5.0. On the other hand, there is a decline in the importance of family-based societal structure. Over the past half-century, negative changes in family systems that pervaded the Western world are now spreading across the globe.

It is undeniable that family bonding works as the nucleus of a human-centric society. A lack of a proper and responsible family structure can gradually decompose the value of human interactions, hence a human-centric society where the elderly population in particular would be left mute in their lonely wilderness.

Family well-being has a few indirect references across the 2030 SDG agenda such as ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages or promoting shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate. Again, reducing the global suicide rate that falls under SDG3.4.2 addresses promoting mental health and well-being. In addition, violence against women and girls is also a target for SDG 5.

Despite the differences in marital laws and practices, core family values of love, care, and protection as well as shared responsibilities are universal. Irrespective of social or cultural identity, family relationship is an inevitable contributing factor to psychological well-being.

Given the gravity and the spread of the concern of the aged population, as well as the concerns for psychological wellbeing for adolescents and adults global leaders might want to come up with specific targets and strategies to encourage future generations for a family and human-centric mindset.

Therefore, a family or human-centric society and psychological well-being deserve to be a primary target for holistic peace and prosperity of people and the planet.

1.32. Rising trend of lifestyle diseases among Malaysians / The rising trend of non-infectious Diseases continues / Shouldn't we stop NCDs rise too? / Tingkat kesedaran elak penyakit disebabkan gaya hidup *[in Bahasa Melayu]*

Malay Mail. 2023 Dec 21
Life News Agency. 2023 Dec 21
Wilayah.Com.My. 2023 Dec 21
Malaysia Gazette. 2023 Dec 23
Berita Harian. 2023 Dec 24
Business Today. 2023 Dec 24
Apa Khabar TV. 2024 Jan 02
Daily Express. 2024 Jan 21

NOMCOMMUNICABLE diseases such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases (CVD), and cancer are leading causes of death globally. These four diseases are also linked to one another.

Obesity is one of the major risk factors for the development of diabetes. In turn, both obesity and diabetes are major modifiable risk factors that can lead to CVD. Again, diabetes is associated with increased cancer risk.

All these four conditions are caused largely because of dietary and other lifestyle factors. In 1998 the WHO warned that the war against ill-health in the twenty-first century will have to be fought simultaneously on two main fronts, one of which is to fight against noncommunicable diseases such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other "lifestyle" conditions.

The increasing trend of these lifestyle diseases is well evident in the published reports from the WHO and independent research.

According to a report published in the Lancet, the prevalence of obesity almost doubled from 1980 to 2008. The number of obese men increased from 4.8% to 9.8% and that of women increased from 7.9% to 13.8%.

Almost 10 years later the same journal published research showing a growing trend of overweight and obesity continue in adults and children. From 1975 to 2016, the prevalence of overweight or obese children and adolescents aged 5–19 years increased more than four-fold from 4% to 18% globally.

Scientific reports also showed that the proportion of global overweight or obese adults increased between 1980 and 2013 from 28·8% to 36·9% in men, and from 29·8% to 38·0% in women. Prevalence of overweight or obesity in 2013 in children and adolescents in developed countries was also recorded at 23·8% for boys and 22·6% for girls – significantly higher than the previous years.

The prevalence of diabetes has been steadily increasing over the past few decades similar to that of obesity and overweight. Noticeably, the majority of the patients having diabetes are living in low-and middle-income countries.

According to the WHO, as of today, there are more than 420 million people worldwide who have diabetes, the disease that causes 1.5 million deaths each year. This number is far more than the WHO prediction in 1998. The estimated number of diabetes cases in adults was predicted to be 300 million in 2025 from 143 million in 1997.

The earlier prediction and the current prevalence did not help to prevent the prevalence of diabetes. On the contrary, the predicted prevalence in the future sounds rather more alarming. From the year 2025 to 2060, the prevalence of diabetes mellitus in the USA is predicted to increase by 39.3%.

A similar possibility is predicted for obesity to increase by 8.3%. Concurrently, the projected prevalence of ischemic heart disease, heart failure, and myocardial infarction will similarly increase by 31.1%, 33.0%, and 30.1% respectively from the year 2025 to 2060.

The prevalence and deaths due to cancer are no different than any of the other non-communicable diseases.

According to the WHO report of 1998, cancer would remain one of the leading causes of death worldwide. This has also been proven true. According to the journal BMJ Oncology, global incidence of early-onset cancer increased by 79.1% and the number of early-onset cancer deaths increased by 27.7% between 1990 and 2019. Globally, 18,094,716 million cases of cancer were diagnosed in 2020.

It is rather more alarming to hear the prediction of cancer risk by Professor Shuji Ogino, at Harvard Chan School and Harvard Medical School. Prof Shuji noted that the risk of having cancer is increasing with each generation. For instance, people born in 1960 experienced higher cancer risk before they turned 50 than people born in 1950. He predicts that the risk level will continue to climb in successive generations.

Focusing on Malaysia, the increasing trends of non-communicable lifestyle diseases give a grieving scenario. The percentage of adult males living with overweight and obesity has increased from about 30% to above 50% from 1993 to 2019.

The WHO has estimated that in 2030, Malaysia will have a total number of 2.48 million diabetics compared to 0.94 million in 2000 – a 164% increase.

On World Cancer Day (4 February 2023) cancer researchers estimated approximately 1 in 10 individuals in Malaysia to be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime. In the year 2020 the number of reported cancer cases in Malaysia was below fifty thousand and deaths due to cancer were below thirty thousand out of over 32 million people at that time.

Taken together, these reports not only show the prevalence but also the predicted rise of those lifestyle-related diseases over the years. This gives rise to two pertinent questions: why have we failed to prevent the predicted rise of those diseases? And, will we be able to prevent the prediction from coming true?

This question needs attention as our future generations are at risk of deadly conditions that are often irreversible.

Needless to say, we have proven our ability in medical biotechnology where we are now able to produce new vaccines in a couple of months and administer the vaccine to the global population in an unprecedented shorter period than has happened ever before. Here I am referring to our success story in combating COVID-19.

Indeed, developing and administering vaccines to the global population is not the same as preventing lifestyle diseases that need utmost individual awareness. But at the policy level, there is a lot more that could be done to tame the rising trend of lifestyle diseases.

1.33. Retractions and reputations / Reading between the lines of retractions

Business Today. 2023 Dec 26
Life News Agency. 2023 Dec 26
The Star. 2023 Dec 27
Bebas News. 2023 Dec 27

Every year the announcement of global university rankings comes with joy and pride for Malaysian universities. Finding prestigious spots on the ranking list represents an all-out effort of the universities toward global branding. They are all in line with the aspiration to make Malaysia the regional hub for higher education.

In academia, we eagerly wait for the next rounds of announcements to see if our institutions go up on the list.

Amidst that waiting, a Nature news on 12 December 2023 emerged with countries with the highest rate of retracted research publications. And retractions are not good news!

One or another form of misconduct is the major cause of those retractions. The shock wave of that news might have shaken many Malaysian academics finding Malaysia in 6th position in the list of countries with the highest rate of retraction.

For others, the anticipated tsunami was not unforeseen. In 2022, a paper published in the journal "Accountability in Research" reported an analysis of authorship patterns in 4,561 papers from 1990 to 2020 of 94 academics from 3 research universities in Malaysia.

Using different years as cut-off periods, it was observed that the appearance of the academics as co-author in their papers had steeply risen around the years: 2006, 2007, and 2008 – a period which corresponds to the adoption of the "publish or perish policy" by the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia.

On one hand, the increased number of authors in the multi-author papers and the appearance of the selected academics as co-authors reflect the extent of boosting collaborative research. On the other hand, the sudden rise in the number of co-authored papers might imply that they might not have proper intellectual contributions in those papers where they are credited as co-authors.

Surely, the above analysis does not tell if the academics had to resort to one or another form of misconduct to boost their publications. Nevertheless, it shows the pressure that pushed them against the wall to prove their publication productivity beyond their usual trend in the past.

Furthermore, a sudden increase of 3- to 4-fold publication productivity in a given time attests to a probable lack of authenticity and reproducibility of the results in the published research.

Keeping aside the assumption of any forms of misconduct in those papers, it is now clear that as a whole, papers authored by Malaysian academics are under the spotlight of retraction watch.

There are a few probable consequences if Malaysia continues to remain under that spotlight. Firstly, no matter what positions Malaysian universities will have in the global university rankings, a parallel ranking on the highest rate of retraction will jeopardize the aspiration of making Malaysia a reliable higher education hub in the region.

Secondly, if the list of retractions is brought down to the institutional level, which is most likely to happen in the near future, then the affected institution and its academic staff will lose their reputation and recognition not only at a national level but also at a global level.

And thirdly, the justification of the appointment or promotion of individuals who might be identified with some of their papers being retracted in the future might raise a major concern.

There is no doubt that the praxis of "publish or perish" has its fair share of driving academicians and researchers to push against the wall to prove their productivity, fake or not. At the same time, predatory paid journals with a deceitful praxis of “pay and publish” have offered them the avenue to sustain the pressure. The inevitable outcome of this is what we are seeing now in the growing list of retractions at an alarming rate.

If the policymakers in academia both at national and international levels are not reading the messages between the lines of retractions – a reversal of academic misconduct will be nearly impossible.

1.34. Shouldn't we be worried about the retractions? / Malaysia is among the world top eight with retractions

Malay Mail. 2023 Dec 19
Life News Agency. 2023 Dec 19
Asia News Today. 2023 Dec 24

On 12 Dec 2023, a news headline in Nature might have shocked the academic world. A new "smashing" record of more than 10,000 retracted papers was recorded in 2023. "Retractions are rising at a rate that outstrips the growth of scientific papers" – the news says.

One can easily surmise if that number is far less than the actual number that should have been retracted for the reasons they were retracted.

Hindawi journals alone pulled more than 8,000 articles over the compromised concerns for the "systematic manipulation of the publication and peer-review process" – the news added.

Albeit, those who keep an eye on the issue of scientific misconduct might not be surprised. In the year 2012, a paper published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science USA, famously known as PNAS, reported a dramatic increase of retraction in every five years from 1977 to 2011. The percentage of scientific articles retracted because of fraud increased 10-fold between 1975 and 2011.

However, what might be more shocking is the "unforeseen" presence of Malaysia among the top eight countries with the highest number of retractions in 2023. Nature's analysis counted an article for a country if at least one co-author has an affiliation in that country. If retractions based on conference papers are excluded, Saudi Arabia has the highest retraction rate, of 30 per 10,000 articles. That rate for Malaysia is 17.2.

Academics and researchers bank on many forms of scientific misconduct namely plagiarism, duplication, manipulation of results, compromised peer-review process, and unethical authorship practice.

They also use "cheap" avenues to publish their papers in predatory paid journals by paying the so-called "open access fees" or "article processing fees" (APC).

Their sole objective is to have more publications in their bank. The number they aim (read "are forced to aim") for is far more than it is realistic. Hence, it is their misconduct exercise for an inflamed number of papers. If identified, those misconducts could be the reasons for retraction.

Over and over again, the "pressure to publish" has been blamed as the culprit for provoking scientific misconduct. Nevertheless, authorities and policymakers in academia who are responsible for the appointment, promotion, and research grant approval continue to count the number of papers authored by the applicants. They aim to crown the name of their institution in the list of global fame – a fake fame it is in reality.

What the authorities and policymakers in academia failed to recognize is that the number they are imposing on the academics and researchers is not realistic – it is not achievable in a proper way. On the other hand, because of their improbable branding desire, academics and researchers are under pressure to publish more papers.

Policymakers in academia are efficient in making calculations on how to increase the publication productivity of their academic and research staff. The number of publications by their staff is often compared with that of other universities in the country and region. Often the achievement of an individual is compared to a global benchmark in their field.

To them, it is unacceptable if the achievements, i.e., the publication productivity represented by the number of papers, are not comparable.

Besides, to increase their number of publications with global repute, academics and researchers are encouraged to have international collaborative networks. Malaysian universities have been aggressively exploring their research networks for more than a decade. On a positive note, this networking has resulted in increased visibility of Malaysian researchers in the world. At the same time, it helped Malaysia to enjoy research impact in various ways.

For example, a paper published in 2015 in Scientometrics concluded that international collaboration contributed to higher annual citation counts and average citation values of papers co-authored by Malaysian researchers from 2000-2009.

However, should they want to continue to do research collaboration, they must carefully choose their potential partners. If the partnerships are established in the countries with the highest number of retractions, that might in the long run bring more pain and predicament than gain.

Having Malaysia named in the list of top countries with the highest number of retractions in 2023, it is time for the authorities and policymakers in academia in Malaysia to give due heed to their strategy and desire for branding.

Imposing unrealistic KPI for research publications and forcing potentially harmful research networks must be avoided.