

The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus presents

Voices:

Questions of Democracy in Culture and Media

Centre for the Study of Communications and Culture



Venue: Annexe Gallery
Central Market Annexe, Top floor (2nd floor),
Jalan Hang Kasturi, 50470 Kuala Lumpur.

Date: Saturdays, April – June 2013

Time: 8.00pm - 10.30pm



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The Centre for the Study of Communications and Culture (CSCC) embarked on a series of projects, beginning in early 2011, to establish and maintain its role as a key centre of excellence in communications and cultural studies in the country and the region. Part of this initiative lay with a seminar series under the general theme of Culture, Media and Identity. The series comprised lectures or multimedia presentations by renowned scholars and cultural activists. The main aim of the series is to examine and evaluate the importance of culture and the media in the construction of identities in an increasingly globalised world. This, we believe, is important in a region comprising multiple cultures and at a time when greater cultural awareness, understanding and respect is needed but, unfortunately, has not been forthcoming.

The first series of presentations which was held from February-May 2011, entitled **Voices: Public Intellectuals and Public Discourse in South and South-East Asia**, provided critical engagements with contemporary issues related to the role(s) of public intellectuals and public discourses in often-authoritarian settings. This series examined the various theoretical trajectories that the overall project could take, thus helping to formulate and guide the intellectual direction of the Centre.

The second series, entitled **Voices: Media, Politics and Identity in Contemporary South-East Asia** explored the changing place of media in the construction of identity and its implications in contemporary society. It examined the politics of various media forms, and how cultural products are used to articulate and legitimate competing ideological agendas. There is an urgent need (particularly in this region) to understand what it means for people to forge identities in rapidly changing national, social and cultural contexts, and the role of media in such efforts.

Certainly the mainstream media has contributed to moral panics and sensationalized discourses around particular marginalized identities pertaining to Muslims in Europe, sexual minorities, the migrant worker and refugee. Closer to home, there are growing signs of grassroots democracy as campuses have returned to becoming sites of political contestation and orang asli and sexual minorities claim public visibility in the legal realm. These are crucial issues that this third series **Voices: Questions of Democracy in Culture and Media** will examine more closely.

Our fourth series planned for the future, **Unruly Voices: Diversity and Discourse in Malaysian Publics** will further explore the range of creative and unruly modes through which increased democratic political participation is and can be achieved in Malaysia, thus engaging a diverse cross-section of the general public and catalysing conversations about the role of citizens in democratic communication and participation.

Introduction

As 2013 will see Malaysians going to the polls to exercise electoral democracy, this series takes the timely opportunity to ask what democracy in the broadest sense of the word means to various segments of society, some of which have not experienced everyday forms of liberty that the average Malaysian ostensibly takes for granted. For example, since Malaysia is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention Act, it is not legally obligated to make any humanitarian provisions for asylum seekers. Moreover even those who are recognised by the UNHCR do not have the legal right to work and thus, no right to the already circumscribed protection of workers if they work illegally. The 2012 Peaceful Assembly Act indeed prohibits foreigners from participating in public protest, further diminishing democratic expression and violating individual human rights.

How is democracy interpreted and connected to sexuality rights, refugees, the performing arts, higher education in Malaysia and more generally, Islam in Europe? The speakers in this third series, take turns to examine the roles of theatre practitioners, university students, Muslims, sexual minority rights activists and refugee advocates in carving out space for democracy.

In Western democracies there are growing calls for the recognition of rights of sexual minorities on the basis of 'sexual citizenship': that LGBTIQ people are also citizens entitled to participate in various political, economic, cultural and social spheres as other citizens. Should the LGBTIQ movement in Malaysia adopt such a similar strategy? What complications and cultural nuances shade the transposition of these global discourses to the region? Further, with regard to global differences in literary or theatrical genres, is satire and mockery an acceptable art form? We hope that this series will collectively engage audience members to ask what the abstract notion of democracy means for them individually, as a member of a social group, acting at the scale of the neighbourhood, the community, the nation or as cosmopolitan citizens, and how democracy impacts their everyday lives.



Series III: Voices: Questions of Democracy in Culture and Media

Programme: April – June 2013

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Time: 8.00pm - 10.30pm (Saturdays)

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| 06 April 2013 | Thilaga Sulathireh
Sexuality rights and democracy |
| 20 April 2014 | Yante Ismail
Democracy and Refugee rights |
| 04 May 2013 | Jo Kukathas
Performing arts/theatre and democracy |
| 18 May 2013 | Fahmi Reza
Student Power: Redefining Campus Democracy & Student Rights in Malaysia |
| 01 June 2013 | Prof. James Piscatori
Muslims in Europe: Towards a New Civic Pluralism |



Speaker Profiles



Thilaga Sulathireh

Thilaga Sulathireh co-founded Justice for Sisters, a legal fund for transwomen, in 2011 to assist the transwomen in Negeri Sembilan with their judicial review of section 66 of the

syariah law. She is an active member of Seksualiti Merdeka, an annual sexuality festival in Malaysia, and is an advocate of LGBTIQ rights at both the national and regional level. She is also a researcher and facilitator.

This presentation explores the evolution of the sexuality rights movement parallel to the evolution of democracy in Malaysia. It will also discuss the globalization of the sexuality rights movement, and its impact on the movement in Malaysia.



Jo Kukathas

Jo Kukathas is an actor, director and writer and the founder and director of The Instant Cafe Theatre Company. Set up in 1989 in the aftermath of Operation

Lalang, Instant Cafe used political satire to lampoon everything from political posturing to corruption and throw a darkly funny gaze on Malaysian mores. Jo's research as an API (Asian Public Intellectual) Fellow was the role tradition plays in contemporary theatre in Japan and Indonesia.

What is the relationship between art and politics in Malaysia? Is it true that satire and mockery "bukan budaya kita"? In a country where everything is hotly contested, what role should the arts play in creating a more democratic space?



Yante Ismail

Yante Ismail is the External Relations Officer for the UN Refugee Agency in Malaysia. UNHCR is the lead agency mandated to protect and assist refugees, and find long term solutions

for them. Yante has worked with UNHCR for nearly ten years, focussed in the area of advocacy and mobilising support for the refugee cause.



Fahmi Reza

Fahmi Reza is the DIY documentary filmmaker of *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (2007), a social activist and radical thinker focussed on excavating Malaysia's history of student

activism on the left. Currently Fahmi is interested in fostering critical thinking among youth and students on issues of democracy and freedom beyond the ballot box.

For the past 40 years, campus democracy in Malaysia has been reduced to the act of casting a vote once a year to elect a Students' Representative Council that has no power to govern their own affairs. Public universities are under the authoritarian rule of campus administrators and government officials, while students are treated as immature consumers without rights to have their voices heard or the power to influence decisions. In a truly democratic campus, should students be given more power and autonomy over their own affairs and more rights to participate in university governance?



Prof. James Piscatori

Professor Piscatori's work has centred on two themes: Islam and international relations; and Islamic political thought, particularly as it relates to democratisation in Middle Eastern societies. His area focus has been principally, but not exclusively, on the Arab states of the Gulf. Recently, he has been working on pan-Islamism and Islamic transnationalism, and specifically investigating the contemporary meaning of the ummah (community of the faith).

A notable feature of the modern experience is the increasing and permanent presence of Muslim minorities in the West. Whether in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Netherlands, or elsewhere in Europe, Muslims have been subjected to media stereotyping and discrimination on the job and in schools, even as they engage with and participate in the system. In the process, they are both adapting to life in these societies and challenging some of their social and political assumptions. For the vast majority of Muslims in the West, prevailing norms are not being rejected; rather, they are often invoked in defence of distinctive minority rights. Proponents of the hijab or headscarf in France, for instance, have routinely invoked the notion of individual liberty and freedom of speech, and British Muslims, upset by Salman Rushdie's novel *Satanic Verses* and urging an extension of the law against blasphemy to Islam and other religions, have built their case on equality of rights. In the process, they are shaping a distinctively Muslim concept of pluralism and helping to reformulate the nature of citizenship in democracies where communal—and religious—rights have not traditionally been central to civic order. This lecture will address such aspects of the Muslim-Western encounter that is taking place in Europe itself.

Series I (February - May 2011)

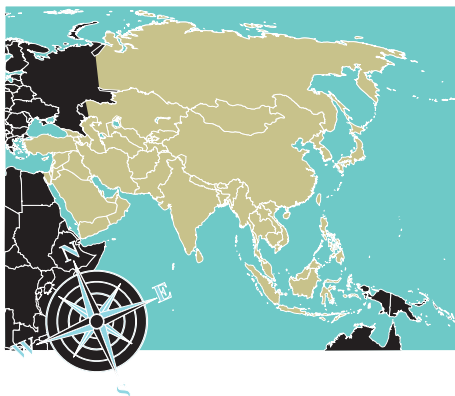
Voices: Public Intellectuals and Public Discourse in South and South-East Asia

Series II (October - December 2011)

Voices: Media, Politics and Identity in Contemporary South-East Asia

Series III (April - June 2013)

Voices: Questions of Democracy in Culture and Media



The Centre for Study of Communication (CSCC) is located within the School of Modern Languages and Culture at the University of Nottingham (Malaysia Campus). Researchers at the Centre are dedicated to carrying out interdisciplinary research into the role and politics of communication and culture in this era of globalization; in line with the Centre's mission to operate as an international, regional and national centre of expertise for high-quality research. CSCC provides an intellectual network for researchers, postgraduate students and professionals in the fields of media, communication and culture.

The first of its kind in Malaysia, the Centre aims to bring together local and international scholars in a setting designed to produce results that will inform wider policies. The Centre was also established to fill a research void in the country and regionally in the area of communications and culture, especially at a time when the promises of information and

communication technologies (ICTs), digitalization and globalization need to be addressed side by side with their inherent impacts on local cultural practices.

The Centre also offers a range of postgraduate programmes in cultural, communications and media studies, area studies, creative industries and film and television. The Centre is also linked to undergraduate programmes such as the BA (Hons) International Communications Studies and the BA (Hons) International Relations.

Together with the core activities of research, teaching and publishing, the Centre organizes lectures, seminars and events that are of interest to researchers, professionals and students.

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