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Good old days of journalism revisited

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SELDOM is there occasion for ex-journalists to gather around and reminisce about the good, and sometimes bad, old days. Seemingly at peace some still hanker for the adrenalin rush of competition.

Welcomed, therefore, was the recent gathering of former Utusan Melayu journalists to inaugurate the formation of Kelab Veteran Utusan Melayu. Among them were ministers and stalwarts of opposition parties.

Sitting besides this scribe was former Group Editor Johan Jaaffar, and across the table was Deputy Information Minister Datuk Khalid Yunus.

Sitting at another table was National Laureate Samad Said together with Subki Latif, former leader writer and now Pas spokesman and columnist. He had contested against Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Kubang Pasu during the last general election.

At other tables were veterans from the 1950s to 1980s, including state executive council members, supporters of Umno, Parti Keadilan and Parti Rakyat, former Darul Arqam members, and another minister. As Senator Datuk Zainuddin Maidin (Zam) said in his opening address the association would serve as a durable link between the past and the present.

Recalled with pride was the role of Yusof Ishak, founder of Utusan and later first President of the Republic of Singapore when the PAP attained power.

Given honourable mention was a former Menteri Besar of Terengganu, the late Ibrahim Fikri deemed to have "saved Utusan at a time of dire crisis".

Cited was Utusan's role since its birth 61 years ago in the struggle for independence and the fight against Indonesian confrontation during the Sukarno regime.

Noted too was the service of eminent journalist Tan Sri Samad Ismail who did not stay long but whose memoir harked back more to Utusan.

Unavoidably absent because of illness was Othman Wok, news editor who became a minister in the first PAP government in Singapore.

Inevitably mentioned was the Utusan Melayu strike in 1961 led by then editor Said Zahari, later detained for 17 years in Singapore under the Internal Security Act.

As Senator Zam recalled: "When he arrived in Kuala Lumpur after his release the first person he came to see was Melan Abdullah (now Tan Sri), the person who helped break the strike." Such too are the stuff of reminiscences.

A trait among journalists who learn in due course that they cannot change the world is the ability to laugh at themselves. Thus the story about a senior editor who liked to stand behind a young reporter typing his story. He would then suddenly rip off the poor cub's copy because of grammatical errors.

There were other copy editors who were hard taskmasters and fastidious.

In another newspaper office a news editor one day stood on his chair, shouting and waving sheafs of a story written by a reporter deemed unworthy of publication.

Those were palmier days for the seniors. No editor dares to do such things now for fear of a strike in the name of human rights!

These are days, however, when some journalists commit any one of what have been termed as the seven deadly sins of journalism - distortion, worshipping false images, invasion of privacy, character assassination, exploitation of sex, poisoning the minds of children and abuse of media

power. The list, by the way, comes from the pen of a prominent English journalist.

Envied by some is A.M. Rosenthal, 73, who retired from the New York Times many years ago and just recently was recruited by the tabloid Daily News as a columnist. He had been credited with saving the NYT from premature death.

After all of which must now be told a story about the "swindle sheet", the expenses claim form filled in by journalists after their journey here and there. The story is about a reporter who, in a less than busy week wrote in his claim form "To Taxi up office stairs". It was said that he got away with it.

For journalists and their readers, viewers and listeners then is the advice from the ubiquitous sage: no life without its regrets nor without its consolations. In the early 1950s the Utusan Melayu sales hovered around 5,000 copies or so only. Its Sunday paper, Minggu Malaysia now enjoys a circulation of over 550,000 copies, the highest in the country. Congratulations and thank you to the veterans.

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