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Abstract	This paper will discuss the methodology and practice of an Internet reception study in Malaysia. While its particular focus is on participant response to the online edition of the Malaysian Star newspaper (see <www.thestar.com.my>), of equal importance in our investigation is development of the cognitive theory derived from phenomenological hermeneutics informing the study.

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From Portal to Person
An Asian Reception Study of Electronic 'Fast News' and Fun
The Malaysian Star Newspaper Online

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Panel: Media

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WORK IN PROGRESS

Introduction

This paper will discuss the methodology and practice of an Internet reception study in Malaysia. While its particular focus is on participant response to the online edition of the Malaysian Star newspaper (see <www.thestar.com.my>), of equal importance in our investigation is development of the cognitive theory derived from phenomenological hermeneutics informing the study.

The participants in the focus groups were all students from Universiti Tuanku Abdul Rahman, a new private university set up by a political party associated with an ethnic group, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). They consist of undergraduates from both media studies and non-media studies streams, meeting in three groups to facilitate discussion.¹

Methodology

We are interested in determining patterns of reasoning both in regard to:

- (i) the perception test² - where we seek to establish participant 'horizons of understanding' (Gadamer) media concepts prior to discussion, and
- (ii) the focus groups - as contributors deploy their concepts in a projective and holistic reading of web pages.

We anticipate focus group participants not only to engage in deductive/ inductive reasoning (from/ to generalisation), but also to employ horizons of understanding Web phenomena. The last will involve them in abduction - applying abstract perceptions to particular instances.

The perception test is divided into two parts, Part A and Part B. Part A seeks to contextualise the responses of the respondents by questioning them about their general assumptions or 'horizons of understanding' concerning media and lifestyle. Part B has more specific questions pertaining to media, online journalism, journalism, and Web portals.

These groups contained around four contributors. Focus groups establish narratives concerning participants' reflexive consciousness (or self-monitoring) of Web access, their cognitive and emotive responses to e-journalism. Contributors both project (anticipate) online content and establish its holistic meaning through a hermeneutic circle of understanding (Gadamer), or bi-directional thought.

Language is centrally constitutive of meaning when performing any cognitive task

like thinking, remembering past experiences, and deciding on the answers to give to questions at hand. As many of the respondents were educated in the Chinese medium (in Chinese vernacular schools in Malaysia), their immersion in the language will inflect the way they learn, perceive and communicate in English. Some will be thinking in Chinese while simultaneously translating to English as they speak. As the Chinese language has different features from English, it structures acquiring the latter as a second language.

Establishing User 'Horizons of Understanding' (Gadamer)

Part A of the Perception Test

1. It is generally agreed by participants of the focus groups that lifestyle is defined in terms of how 'people lead their lives', by how their lives are influenced by the fads, fashion and cultures of the society in which they live in as well as the day-to-day living out of a routine.

2. For the question on what a 'media portal' is, none of the respondents make the connection between that and lifestyle. They have not made the mental leap to connect media to lifestyle. They see media as a separate entity to lifestyle, a channel for information flow, and a provider of resources as well as entertainment. None of them view media as an outgrowth of a modern, gradually globalising lifestyle, one that stems from a need to communicate one's thoughts and cultures.

3. There is a cognitive gap in the perception of news between respondents who have studied news production (the journalism majors) and those who did not. The journalism majors focus more on what they perceive to be the way news is produced, from a theoretical and practical standpoint. The respondents who are in mass-communication specialisation but who are not journalism majors seem to view news as an end product, rather than as an ongoing production process, perceiving it from the perspective of the end-user.

4. For the question "What differences/similarities do you see between the terms 'content provider' and 'news provider'?", it is difficult to find any general pattern to their responses as each has their own views on how they perceive 'content provider' and 'news provider'. However, one finds that most of the respondents have a better idea as to the function of the news provider than they do of the content provider. Many of them seem to be confused by the term 'content provider' and attempted to hazard a guess when discussing this question, though one of them admitted to not being sure.

One respondent sees content providers and news providers as performing the same function (male Indian, journalism major). Two of the respondents view content providers as a general set from which the news providers are derived (female Chinese). Four respondents see content providers as providing soft news, basic information or entertainment ('eye candies') to their audiences (2 male Chinese, 2 female Chinese). Another respondent views content providers as providing B2B services to news providers (female Chinese). Another sees content providers as "just providing intended news. While 'news provider' is providing all kind of news without bias" (female Chinese).

A confusion between the two terms 'content provider' and 'news provider' could be related back to the lack of exposure to media terms and concepts, as well as the level of language (English) competency of the respondents. It is noted that none of the respondents brought up this issue during focus group discussion and most did not relate it to their responses during the discussion.

5. This section covers the 'objective' answers provided by the respondents. To the question of whether accounts and images of lifestyle filtered through a portal using text and audio-visuals meet every individual's needs, eight of the respondents felt that this is generally true, while three more thought that it is a possibility.

Only one respondent disagrees with the assertion that online advertisements contain accounts and images of lifestyle pursued by visitors to the portals. None deny that lifestyle narratives fill the screens of electronic media.

6. All the respondents agree that the attractiveness and the information content of a portal are what induced their subsequent visits. Most of them place a higher premium on content rather than the design of the portal, though they would want one that is easily accessible, has trustworthy content, interesting writing styles, multimedia usage and simple layout. Their answer to their expectation of a portal is highly similar to the first question of what would induce their repeat visits.

7. More than one third of the students do not find the lifestyle portals induce an extravagant and unrealistic level of lifestyle expectations: around a third believe that they do, because as one female Chinese respondent puts it, they give the "wrong view" and "misguide" people. A male Chinese respondent believes that there is too much emphasis on upper class 'purse strings' when the majority of the portal viewers are of middle class background.

8. There is an almost even division with regard to the question as to whether any of the respondents find the Malaysian portals unique. Half of them believe it to be so, with one respondent citing Malaysiakini.com as an example of the only independent news media in Malaysia (Indian male). They also believe that Malaysian portals do portray cultures and ideas particular to Malaysia. The rest find little differences between the portals they find elsewhere and the portals they find in Malaysia, citing the elevation of Western ideals in most portals as one of the reasons.

Part B of the Perception Test

9. All of the respondents, with the exception of one, don't deny that it is difficult for news outlets like portals to practise responsible journalism. The one person who disagrees feels that it could be done (male Chinese). Some of the other respondents who agree felt that the kind of precedence set by the media's practices, the ethics practiced by the journalists and reporters, and the degree of press freedom play a role in influencing

the quality of journalism.

10. The respondents all agree, mostly to a greater extent, that responsible journalism involves a wide dissemination of information to everyone without any form of discrimination. However, at least one of them disagree with the idea that responsible journalism involves disseminating of news that would not lead to widespread dissatisfaction or agitation, though he did not give the reason why. One of them who agrees stated that “Reporting the right manner of news is a correct attitude, but I think if it will affect the emotion of the people at large, it’s better to report in a more conservative manner” (female Chinese).

All of them agree that it is important for the content of the information that is publicised to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation. With the exception of two respondents, most don't deny, to a greater or lesser extent, that one way to not discriminate in the dissemination of information is by having the content provider practice censorship across the board.

It is interesting to note that in the next instance, they all agree that the news provider should ensure coverage of all angles to a story, even that which arouses ill feelings. As the second question is worded slightly differently, and from a slightly different angle, there is a cognitive gap when it comes to recognising the relationships between the two related questions.

11. All the respondents believe that online journalism is more than the news that they see on the portals.

12. With the exception of one respondent, the rest to a varying extent believe that online sites provide them with the ability to construct their and their community identities through cut-and-paste features, multimedia and the various presentations of information. They all agree, with a varying degree of conviction, that online sites offer the power to create a communication/information dissemination channel where the author can reveal his or her thoughts and where readers can respond in kind.

They don't deny that online websites give visual representation to their thought processes. They all also agree that online sites offer the capacity to place more emphasis on layout than on textual presentation as the former attracts the audience first. It is also interesting to note that they see text as having the possibility to draw readers more than visuals, though one of them disagree, stating that visuals tend to attract the audiences first (male Indian). However, the other two respondents believe that it would depend on the expectation of visitors to the sites.

13. All the respondents, with the exception of two, believe to varying degrees that the news providers should pay attention to what their audiences have to say, or risk losing them. This is an interesting point because in the discussion group, the two factions further reiterate this point.

The respondents, to a greater or lesser extent, believe that the news providers should consider whether they understand the needs of their readers/audiences. Some of the comments of the respondents in relation to this question are provided below unedited.

'News providers in Malaysia caters more towards their own companies' agenda, rather than what their audiences want.' (Male Chinese)

'Although you know what is best for the readers, it is crucial that telling the correct things and not attract people by telling lies.' (Female Chinese)

'What the news provider think is best for their audiences may not be what the audiences want to know of.' (Female Chinese)

'It might be true when the news providers have done their part/research on the topic, which they are going to report and also fully understand the need of leaders.' (Male Chinese)

They all agree that the news providers should view the judgment of the readers as final. Below are some of the respondents' comments.

'The purpose is to satisfy the readers' needs or interests for constant improvement on their own websites.' (Male Chinese)

'Readers/audiences have their rights to know what is happening around' (Female Chinese)

However, one participant has a different view:

'It is not always true the judgement of readers and audiences. Content provider should also take into consideration what is best for the audience in the end and not just follow their (as in the readers/audiences)' judgement.' (Female Chinese)

14. Most of the respondents strongly agree that the current conditions of the portals are unfriendly to the disabled, especially to the blind.

'The news/ information is only presented in silence form, only. We can read, blind people cannot.' (Female Chinese)

'Blinds can't read, retards find it hard to use the computer' (Female Chinese)

'Majority of the portals are dealing in a form of business opportunity, and, it is focus on the disable group, the particular portal will lose its competitiveness as it can't cater for other larger segments of users.' (Male Chinese)

'They provide not much sound effects so that the disabled can hear what they are clicking on' (Female Chinese)

'Most of them exclude those disabled when they try to attract the people's attention.' (Male Chinese)

'Those who are blind are mostly computer illiterate, thus can't use normal keyboard, leading to low possibility of surfing net. Therefore, less familiar with portals.' (Female Chinese)

Respondents' horizons of understanding could be regarded as analogous to 'cultural schemata' (a subsequent concept in cognitive theory). Schemata are seen as hypothetical

mental structures that “incorporate general knowledge into an organizational framework. Schemata are viewed as complex units of knowledge that exist for generalized concepts underlying objects, situations, events, sequences of events and actions” (Altarriba & Forsythe, 145).

Readers often draw on their background knowledge when trying to understand the meaning, characters and settings found in a particular text. Such use of schemata occurred in focus groups discussing online content.

Establishing Textual Horizons of Understanding the World

Web page access accomplishes a fusion of cognitive horizons, with the reader's perceptions brought to bear on textual perspectives. The latter are foregrounded in discussion by focus group participants, particularly in criticism or where they consider the possibility of an e-journalism articulating new political horizons.

In The Star's 'images of the people, they are more focussing on the glamorous side of the people and they do not really talk about the people who are poor and facing problems.' (female Chinese) 'The Web site news and lifestyle segments, they focus a lot on the elites. (...) They are more pro-government.' (male Chinese)

'If The Star really just wants to sustain as an online paper, I think they should start giving out a new, like, third perspective (...) but then, of course, I don't think it is quite possible. (...) But, then, if you look at other alternative media like Malaysiakini and Kancil, actually why people tend to go there is because they're actually giving out different perspectives (...) what a major newspaper couldn't cover, I mean even if they want to publish.' (male Chinese)

The Internet Reception Study:

Theorising Focus Group Responses as Ludic

Accessing the Web is 'serious fun' (Huizinga, 1970) or ludic. The second section of this article explores the relationship between an audience's immersive reading of news items online (serious segments) and its regulated response to fun (entertainment or life-style menus) on an Asian portal site: the Malaysian Star online.

Whether occurring in focus groups or everyday life, user narratives of Internet access are recounted by readers-in-play-like-appropriation of virtual content. People have at least implicit (and sometimes explicit) goals in travelling on the Web, and are not merely subjects looking on at content (Flynn, 2003) - onlookers online. Reading The Star site, we 'just click on the page we wish to read', it's 'easy to locate what we want' (male Chinese).

Motivation for using the Internet can be either intrinsic and Web focussed (prompting immersion in its content, as if at play) or instrumental/ extrinsic (related to achieving offline goals) in its ambition. Intrinsic/ extrinsic motives may operate

concurrently, with people enjoying their ludic virtual experience while it simultaneously serves a material purpose. Alternatively, Internet access can be entirely instrumental, or liminally ludic.

Some cyberspace players may 'get addicted to' the Internet (female Chinese). For others, 'life-style before the IT Age was much more interesting', 'more outdoor' (female Chinese). Internet access, like playing a game, can involve striving, be 'straining' (male Indian). 'Reading from the PC is very tiring' (female Chinese): a book or newspaper lets you 'lie down on your bed' (female Chinese).

Web sites compete to attract and address users with the same extrinsic needs (eg. for financial news). Such competition creates a customer friendly cyberspace. Successful home pages know their visitors, encouraging the latter's return by not only satisfying their instrumental purpose in going online but additionally offering intrinsic aesthetic enjoyment in accessing content [eg. immersive access to 'live news telecasts from conferences or places' (male Chinese)]. In respect of the latter, The Star lifestyle menu prompted a critical response from two female Chinese students, who found it less than entertaining: 'each category is a few topics only', 'dull', 'no pictures (...) no visuals at all, and it's very short', 'not much of choice'.

Sites can function well both as practical and pleasure-giving resources. Using The Star online, you 'can really locate which segment that you are actually looking for', an archive makes it 'easy for me to get what I want' (female Chinese students). Likewise, construction of an enjoyable Internet presence is important, attracting both users and students of its design. Accomplished Web page authors,

'attract users to get into their sites (...) attract us to enter to the site to check about news, how they design their layout, and how they design their functions for us to use' (male Chinese).

i. Portals and Users' Projection of Meaning:

The 'Hermeneutic Circle' (Gadamer) of Understanding

Internet hermeneutics posits people's coming to understand a Web text (online page or pages connected by hypertext) as a process that while drawing on past 'retention' (the memory of previous sites), is continually projected towards the future ('protention', or anticipation of content). Informed by a generic knowledge of Web site types, those accessing particular instances anticipate finding associated kinds of meaning. Recognising a news site, viewers expect e-journalism.

Hermeneutics resists accounts of audiences merely absorbing media content, whether from film, television or Internet screen. Instead, drawing on generic presuppositions, sometimes crossing unfamiliar cultural horizons, the viewer's interpretative accomplishment of understanding media stories online needs close analysis - not least where there is failure to comprehend. While for one female Chinese student, 'the news (narratives), they are not too long', 'we can understand what they are trying to

tell us', for another, 'the features, sometimes they can get too long' (female Chinese).

Research employing the detailed empirical scrutiny of responses to screens enabled by focus groups, maps users' hermeneutic processing of content through the cognitive activities of media consumption. Listening to contributors' discourse, tacit horizons of understanding the Internet (eg. as pluralist in perspective) may be discerned.

Viewers' projection of meaning occurs across all media types. Expectation of likely events on screen can rest, for example, on an audience's noting that a television drama conforms to the soap opera format; similarly, access to generic sites prompts appropriate anticipation of Web content. As in using the Internet, media reception occurs in time with viewers remembering earlier types of page or programme, and applying that knowledge to productive engagement with the instance before them. In everyday gossip and focus groups, audience talk about television conveys such recognition and realisation.

The viewer's goal in so constructing (and subsequently checking) her or his anticipated narrative chain of events is to constitute coherent story content, often filling in the gaps or lacunae left by the text itself. Lacking explicit information in a news narrative (eg. as to a developing relationship between two individuals at its heart), readers render determinate the indeterminate, measuring the accuracy of their hypothetical interpretation against an unfolding item of e-journalism.

Projecting and resolving stories, an audience's response to the screen constitutes the hermeneutic formation of understanding, the ludic comprehension of a visual text, a 'guessing game'. Likewise, readers set into play a purposeful to-and-fro gaze across a news narrative online, instantiating through 'concentric (hermeneutic) circles the unity of the understood meaning' (Gadamer, 1975: 259), integrating details to inform an audience's holistic comprehension of an Internet story.

In these cognitive processes of perception, coherent sense on screen is anticipated and invariably achieved. However, Internet texts are complex and can hinder the user's pursuit of a full and informed narrative. 'I think that sometimes it's quite messy because there are too many things on the page. Sometimes you will get confused (over) what sections and what parts you want to logon' (female Chinese).

Hand held or mobile media with a small screen size communicate limited 'data', sketching out stories in brief. This will constrain the capacity of readers to constitute a detailed determinate narrative as a consequence of interacting online. Portability entails web site authorship must celebrate new values, 'I mean like simplicity, short. Because you couldn't expect people to read long length news on their palm or their mobile phone. That will be crazy!' (male Chinese).

Simplicity of screen and segment is consistently regarded by focus group contributors as an aesthetic and epistemological virtue. '(A) simple and straight to the point Web site would be the best.' (male Chinese) 'Cut back on the clutter', 'what is not

necessary on the page should be removed so that it's more pleasing to the eye, it's more simple, it works fast' (male Chinese). 'Some Web sites that we go to, the language that they use is a bit complicated. So I think it would be better if they make it simpler and make it shorter for those who are not very good in English to understand' (female Chinese). 'In terms of advertisements, all those should be taken out, simplify the whole presentation. (...) Those news Web sites, Daily Oriental (?) and China Daily (...) they are very simple, they have not many advertisements' (male Chinese).

Knowledge of television's linear texts where programme narratives have a single spatio-temporal reference point (eg. the soap opera community located around a street) is more easily represented as intelligibly unified than awareness of the multi-linear texts formed by a Web page and its hyperlinks to stories occupying distinct locations in space and time.

One can draw up a phenomenology (or experiential description) of the audience's embodied gaze at screen-mediated events as its ludic construction of narrative meaning. This activity may take different forms, from the momentary to the more prolonged. Looking back and forth across a filmic scene in comprehending relationships between characters, or securing such knowledge through accessing hyperlinked pages on the Internet, is accomplished more swiftly than viewing a further episode of a television serial to check one's anticipation of story developments.

Interpreting incidental images (eg. advertising) appearing unexpected-ly on screen (even to discard them) can interfere with understanding the sought for and significant. On Star Web pages, distraction by 'flash files' may delay accessing a hypertext link to a desired Internet site.

'In terms of the layout, I think they are using too many flash files and all those advertisement banners'. When you click on a hypertext link, 'the thing that came out first was the advertisement, then only came out the hypertext (...) you forget your main point of looking at the Web site' (male Chinese).

Here, the reader's achieving the primary instrumental goal of his going online is undermined by engaging in a secondary instantiation of the hermeneutic circle of comprehension - the process of understanding the advertisement narrative. 'Popups' subvert pursuing the screen user's projection and securing of meaning for an offline purpose. 'I think I will agree with him because there are too many distractions, some like the popup screens.' (female Chinese) 'They need to set a line for those advertisers' (female Chinese).

ii. Contexts of Consumption:

The Economics and Epistemology of Online/Offline Journalism

E-journalism is 'timely', distinguished by its immediacy (male Indian). Online news addresses 'fast' readers, decision-making 'business men' (sic) or students, whose goal in

consumption is 'just to capture the main points' (female Chinese) given more detailed presentation elsewhere in hard copy articles.

Integrating narrative highlights through the hermeneutic to-and-fro process of relating such moments to an outlined story (as parts to a whole), the e-journalist should 'summarise the whole article for you' (female Chinese). More elliptically, 'do a bullet-point form at the end (so as to?) summarise the whole story there' (male Chinese).

These 'already summarised' appropriations of hard copy (male Chinese) function financially as a 'short' loss leader for the offline newspaper without which 'they can't generate any revenues'. From a marketing perspective, executives 'push' the online version to encourage people to 'still purchase the hard copy of The Star' (male Chinese).

Newspapers have achieved an integral and practical presence in everyday life, writing the circulation of culture. 'Our culture is somehow based on the hard copy, as we are more used to it', 'reading on the screen is very painful for the eyes' (female Chinese students). 'It's cheaper' (male Indian) to read the hard copy, available without Internet access: 'not everyone can afford PDA's' (Personal Digital Assistants) (female Chinese students) for mobile access.

Use of e-journalism 'depends on reliability, lah'. Online news needs further authentication, since not infrequently 'they just copy a page from other sites, or sometimes just rephrase something, maybe it's not that reliable' (male Chinese).

Hence, the guarantee of The Star's truth online is its derivation from offline Star content: 'we usually go back to those sites which offer the hard copy as well, to me the reliability is more high'. In the latter case, journalists 'really go out to hunt for the news in local or overseas' places, 'they've got specific reporters who are assigned', 'they can really record what really happens'. Otherwise a news source, he may be misleading the readers on certain things and create havoc in the Net or rumours' (male Chinese, his emphasis).

In another focus group, a distinction was made on The Star's (derived?) 'reliability and authority' online in 'local and governmental issues' and its 'little bit lacking' in 'coverage on opposition issues and world news' (male Chinese). Setting out criteria for e-journalism's veracity, focus group participants operated a coherence theory of truth. The hard copy Star newspaper is an 'authority', an 'established newspaper in Malaysia' (female Chinese) validating its more selective online version.

One student noted an infrequent domestic reading of such Internet news despite daily multiple media use of hard copy and television in his home. Portal access is not regular, 'not really, on and off, lah'. In his 'home culture' ('my house'), 'we still more rely on the hard copy', it's 'quite unusual for us to go online':

'if we notice that there's something ongoing, we might go online to check for the latest news, lah, but on and off, we still refer back to the TV news, sometimes for daily summaries', 'if the thing happens about midnight or early in the morning, (and) we

really need to get to know some news, we might log on to the Net to check about that' (male Chinese).

iii. Web Content and Consumption:
News and Life-Style Portals

For both female and male focus group participants, The Star Web site was primarily associated with news, and its life-style menu considered secondary and less informative. Immersive reading was more serious than fun. Generically, the home page was classified as journalism, with our contributors enunciating an appropriate horizon of expectations regarding content and hypertext connection.

The Star online is 'more to a news provider' than accessed by those 'looking for entertainment' (female Chinese). We 'will look at the news more than entertainment', because The Star online is a 'much (more) serious type of Web site', and used accordingly. Other portals are accessed for entertainment information, 'the content there is much (more) comprehensive' (eg. MSN) (female Chinese).

Used interactively as a life-style portal, with its associated menu of entertainment information, The Star was marginally successful in provoking one woman's curiosity and e-mailing of its electronic greeting cards. 'I like to see what is inside' the life-style menu, and 'I quite often use those e-cards because I find them environmentally friendly' (female Chinese).

Male participants likewise placed The Star online generically as a news source. Implicitly mapped out by readers' discourse, appropriate horizons of anticipation were constructed in expectation of the Web site's reporting of significant events. These focus group contributors would not open its menu of life-style segments. 'I perceive The Star as a newspaper', 'I'd search for life-style by using another search engine rather than reading the life-style segment in The Star online', in that way obtaining 'more information' (male Chinese).

Again, one participant ventured an exception, allowing a partially successful address by The Star's lifestyle sections. 'Personally' he would 'seldom look (...) specially for life style', although he would access them for 'business, or motors, or properties'. He used other entertainment portals, 'more related (to him) personally' (male Chinese).

During a discussion, the focus group facilitator (Wilson) asked whether respondents could share interests foregrounded in the lifestyle menus. 'Can you identify with those kinds of interests, recognise the menu as something that you want to use? Is it addressing you?' But, as we have noted, readings of The Star site as focussing on news as not fun were similar across genders who used the website accordingly, thereby foregrounding access to e-journalism.

One female contributor's responses cut across this consensus: her 'opinion would contrast' (Chinese) with the others. 'I prefer that (lifestyle) section more'. Discovering

therein a documented narrative of human existence in unusual 'surroundings', this student accessed its revelation of a city lifestyle. She transcended voyeurism to align herself with its out of the ordinary inhabitants counterfactually - despite her obvious difference and distance:

the lifestyle menu can offer 'some articles which really relate to our surroundings, our environment', 'the articles, sometimes you won't get to see them on other sites or even other newspapers' [eg. ' people who live in Chow Kit (...) who live normal lives (...) how do they face the problems?', 'how is their feeling of looking at prostitutes?', 'I've hardly stepped in Chow Kit, I don't know much on what is happening down there'] (Chinese female).

Beyond Chow Kit, The Star was 'more to Chinese' (female Chinese) in its construction of lifestyle sections 'for those who are interested' (eg. in poetry) (female Chinese). Appropriate address aligns an intended audience, sharing its interests, defining a point of view privileging the concerns of those sought authorially online, securing users.

As a producer, 'I will try to clarify what Web site I am doing and what kind of audience that I am serving' (female Chinese). 'For an online Web site, it is important that they cater for everyone, for people of every age, and also what kind of (Internet) connection they are using.' (male Chinese)

An Indian student identified with Indian Yahoo! But for one Chinese female, The Star insufficiently addressed her cultural interest, defined by reference to ethnicity: 'more I need to access a (Malaysian) Chinese news Web site compared to Star' (female Chinese). Internet narrowcasting to users ultimately 'customises for every user' (male Chinese).

More widely, The Star online can be read as inverting the Yahoo! portal's preoccupations, also a compilation of news and entertainment. 'To me, Yahoo is more like entertainment' (laughter in group), in its news provision 'nothing really relates to me'. On the other hand, the 'layout for The Star online is more (...) news style instead of entertainment style', 'fast news (...) or updates of news, lah' (male Chinese).

iv. On Cyberspatial Construction of Identity:
The Interactive Internet in Life

'Interaction between the provider and the readers is necessary. Because you cannot say that, "Because I am the company, I control all the things, and you need to follow all my things." Because people have their own rights too, to judge the things, to say what they want, and to say what they feel, or they experience before' (female Chinese, her emphases).

Portal content may be appropriated, brought into people's lives. As in The Star online, users can interact with lifestyle segments, adding or abstracting information. Like

the player's ludic engagement with a game, online activity constructs new identities. 'The coming generation will be more computer educated' (female Chinese). Increasing numbers of those reading Internet news is a matter of changing people's 'habits' (male Chinese), supporting them in using new technology to enhance their education.

An interactive portal can be productive. Responding to feedback from users ('a channel for the public to voice out'), institutional recipients can 'do the necessary' (female Chinese). But the Web may undermine those harmonious social relationships upon which society depends. Interactive feedback from readers ('generally personal views') often cannot be included in news, for it would result in 'rumours', 'if they wrote something really sensitive or offensive, it's quite misleading to others (...) it would create havoc in their site, lah' (male Chinese).

Like talk shows on television, chat rooms on the Internet need hosting or moderating to encourage sensitivity to others. One 'must be careful' (male Indian) about religious issues. All sites, not just Malaysian, 'need to be moderated' in regard to coverage of 'sensitive issues on the site' for 'social safety' (male Chinese). A female Chinese participant in the focus group agree: 'if no moderation is to be done, the user must be mature enough' (female Chinese) to self censor.

Self censoring or simply silence on 'sensitive issues, especially like races and religion' (female Chinese) will obviate the need for moderating a chat room. People are 'not likely to talk on these topics' in such spaces online, argued a female Chinese student. But silence may have to be secured by prior agreement.

'Before they can access the chat clubs or forums, there must be terms of agreement, lah, where it's agree that they should not post all these things (eg. on racially sensitive issues). If they do, perhaps action can be taken against them, perhaps you block them from accessing the chat clubs' (male Chinese, his emphasis).

Some e-journalism (such as Malaysiakini) is 'not controlled' (male Indian). Nevertheless, an absence of self-censorship inevitably leads to active censorship by others. 'That's why we don't practice free press, even though we would like to voice our opinions. It's pointless, whatever we write, it definitely will get censored' (female Chinese).

'There is a certain fear, you know, if you put something sensitive there, they might censor it and no-one will read it. And there is also a fear that, you know, if they do publish it and someone in the government doesn't like it (...) they'll come knocking on your door. So, eventually there is that fear that is, you know, in the Malaysian environment, that is perhaps oppressing people from sharing and saying things' (male Chinese, his emphasis).

Curtailling of physical freedom can accompany censorship. 'As a Malaysian, we have things that we cannot say' (eg. statements likely to subvert racial harmony or incite unrest), 'there's always ISA up there' (Internal Security Act) (female Chinese). Given

such constraints, it would be 'impossible to have unmoderated chat rooms', since 'we are not practicing (democracy) fully' (male Indian). Perhaps as a consequence, 'I think Malaysians are quite passive, the majority of them' (female Chinese).

Conclusion

This empirical research has explored two central aspects of a hermeneutic or phenomenological theory of media reception. Thus:

- i) the reader's 'horizons of understanding' through which textual content is engaged with and interpreted;
- ii) the reader's projection of textual understanding and holistic formation of content.

We have shown these concepts instantiated in reception of e-journalism. Further analytical work developing the concerns of this paper will develop insight into abductive reasoning in which participants' horizons of understanding are discursively materialised in particular instances of focus group discourse.

Notes

1. Participants

UTAR 7th May 2004
Business Administration students
2 female Chinese
2 male Chinese
- all entering year three -

UTAR 7th May 2004
Media Studies students
2 female Chinese in journalism & public relations
2 male Chinese in journalism
- all entering year three -

UTAR 14th May 2004
Media Studies students
2 female Chinese in public relations
1 male Indian in journalism
- all entering year three -

2. The Perception Test

PART A

1. I understand 'lifestyle' as

2. I see a 'media portal' as

3.a) What is your idea of news?

b) What differences/similarities do you see between the terms "content provider" and "news provider" ?

4. Accounts and images of lifestyle

a) Will be filtered through a portal using text and audio-visuals to meet every individual's needs

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

b) Are represented in the advertisements generated online and seen by the visitors to the portal

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

c) Fill every screen in today's high tech society

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

5. a) How does your first impression of a portal influence your subsequent visits?

b) What are your expectations of a portal?

6. Do you think that lifestyle portals emphasise 'living it up' to an unrealistic level?

7. Do you find Malaysian lifestyle portals unique in anyway? If so, how?

PART B

8. It is difficult for news outlets like portals to practise responsible journalism

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

9. I believe that 'responsible journalism' consists in

a) Making sure that information is disseminated as widely as possible to everyone without discrimination.

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

b) Making sure that the information disseminated will not lead to widespread dissatisfaction and probably to agitation among the citizens.

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

c) Making sure that the target audience will understand the content of the information before receiving it to avoid misunderstanding.

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

d) Not discriminating in the dissemination of information by having the content provider practice censorship across the board.

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

e) Making sure that all sides of a story are provided, even if it might arouse ill-feelings between factions.

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

10. I believe that online journalism is more than the news one sees in the portals

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

11. I think that online web sites offer

a) The ability to create and build the identity of oneself and others, through cut-and-paste multi-media and information (animation, static images, texts etc)

Always True

Generally True

Maybe True

I Disagree

b) The power to create a communication/information dissemination channel where the author can reveal their thoughts and where readers can respond in kind.

Always True Generally True Maybe True
I Disagree

c) The ability to give visual presentation to a person's thought processes

Always True Generally True Maybe True
I Disagree

d) The capacity to place more emphasis on layout than on textual presentation as the former attracts the audience first

Always True Generally True Maybe True
I Disagree

e) The capacity to emphasise text as it is more important than the visual in first \ attracting readers

Always True Generally True Maybe True
I Disagree

12. News providers should

a) Pay attention to what their readers/audiences have to say or risk losing them

Always True Generally True Maybe True
I Disagree

b) Consider whether they know what is best for their readers/audiences

Always True Generally True Maybe True
I Disagree

c) Content providers should regard their readers'/audiences' judgement as final

Always True Generally True Maybe True
I Disagree

13. Most portals are unfriendly to the disabled (eg. partially blind/blind)

Always True Generally True Maybe True
I Disagree

I agree because

I Disagree because

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