

The Internet and Online News: A Case Study of Urban Youths in the Klang Valley

Carmen S.M. Nge, Sharon Wilson and Pauline P.Y. Leong
Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman

Ngerng M. H.
UCSI University

ABSTRACT

When the Internet was introduced, there were comparatively few websites, especially news websites. Furthermore, only those who were privileged could have access to the Internet. These mostly comprised political parties who developed and maintained discussion groups and websites to disseminate news. Today, new media technology's drastic developments in the communications field has had a big impact on society at large. The development and pervasive availability of information and activities seem to offer people the opportunity of quick access, and systematically allowing for, in seconds, what would have previously taken months, pursuing newspaper stacks of microfilm rolls. These features supersede the more traditional print medium in terms of delivering news with immediacy and impact, and act as a powerful lure that continually draws readers. This paper questions online consumer behaviour with regard to the use of the Internet and explores the reasons for this use. From a survey of 1,000 students of institutions of higher education in the Klang Valley, findings reveal that youths still rely on traditional media to obtain news. Hence, it is not 100% migration to new media, unlike in the United States and Europe. However, almost all respondents own a computer and go online daily. Only a few areas of consumer behaviour show some significant differences between gender and ethnic groups in terms of their online activities. Findings also reveal that the top online news site is *MalaysiaKini* with all others coming in a pale second. It can, therefore, be said that there is no complete migration to the Internet for news. Students' access of online news is still very much in the one-way communication mode (i.e. to get facts and not necessarily to interact or dialogue).

Keywords: Consumer behaviour, Internet, online, youth

1. INTRODUCTION

New technological developments have brought about a revolutionary change in the way news is presented. Previously, people relied on traditional media such as print, radio and television for their daily dose of news – waiting for the news broadcast or the next day's papers. News organisations served as gatekeepers, controlling information flow.

Email: ngesm@utar.edu.my; sharon@utar.edu.my; leongpy@utar.edu.my; ngerngmh@ucsi.edu.my

However, with the advent of the Internet, news is no longer the domain of large news media conglomerates. New media is often deemed to be inherently democratising and liberating, offering the prospects of freeing all from long-standing dependence on a few powerful information providers and their ‘mainstream’ discourse (Paterson, 2007: 2), allowing the average citizen to put forth his views for public viewing and consumption. Because of the relatively free space for articulation of news and views, the Internet has gained a strong following, especially among news junkies. Online news websites are able to present news and disseminate information more attractively by inserting video and audio clips, as well as animated graphics together with the written news report. Such additions enhance the experience of the end-user/reader. Online news is able to combine the characteristics of all three traditional media – print, radio and television – into one medium, thus making it an efficient method of news delivery and consumption.

In addition, information can also reach the audience immediately – especially breaking news. People no longer have to wait a few hours to know what is happening around the world. They can get information at their fingertips every minute. What’s more, Internet sites can be updated any time of the day. News can be delivered 24/7 – something that is lacking in traditional media. This is also one factor that has caused more and more people to turn to online news as their primary source of information.

The development and larger availability of digital news archives seem to offer people the opportunity to access a large corpus of quality news materials quickly, and systematically providing, in seconds, what would have taken previously months of pursuing newspaper stacks or microfilm rolls (Deacon, 2007: 7). These features supersede the more traditional print medium in terms of delivering news with immediacy and impact, and act as a powerful lure that continually draws away readers.

The embrace of online news by users over the past few years has become so great that communities are moving from traditional media of print and broadcast to online media. For Americans younger than 30, the Internet, compared to TV, was the main news source in 2008 as 59% said they got most of their national and international news online, up from 34% in 2007. There was a reverse trend for young Americans who watched TV news. In 2007, 68% of young Americans claimed TV news was the news main source but that figure dropped to 59% in 2008 (Pew Research Centre for People and the Press, 2008).

Table 1. Internet rivals TV as main news source for young people in the US

| Main news source | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 07-08 change |
|------------------|------|------|------|--------------|
| Television | 62% | 68% | 59% | -11 |
| Internet | 32% | 34% | 59% | +25 |
| Newspapers | 29% | 23% | 28% | +5 |
| Radio | 16% | 13% | 18% | +5 |
| Magazines | 1% | # | 4% | +4 |
| Others (Vol.) | 3% | 5% | 6% | +1 |

Source: Pew Research Centre for People and the Press (<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1066/internet-overtakes-newspapers-as-news-source>).

NB: Figures are >100% because multiple responses were allowed.

Online news sites have turned out to be the news platforms with the highest increase in use – half of the respondents said their use of online sites for news had increased over the past two years (Cauwenberge *et al.*, 2010: 336). Alternative sources of news and information are a growing phenomenon, increasing from an estimated 30,000 in 1998 to at least three million by the beginning of 2004 (Johnson and Kaye, 2004: 622).

The growth of online news readership and decline in print circulation has pushed news organisations to venture into the new and uncharted Internet world by launching their own news websites, in a desperate bid to attract new audiences and revive sagging fortunes. Some news organizations, due to lack of resources or incentives, use the ‘shovel ware’ format (Meyers, 2003), which is the direct transfer of information from print to the online edition. Others seek to break new ground by offering original news found only on the Internet and adding audio-visual materials to enhance the end-user’s experience.

The differences between traditional newspapers and online news services are still being explored. Some aspects of the newspaper cannot, at present, be transferred to the digital medium. The physical process of news consumption alters dramatically. For instance, the see-at-a-glance big pages that can be spread on the table or folded on the train – factors that influence people to choose newspapers rather than watch or listen to news – are not reproducible on the computer screen. Nevertheless, technology has allowed news to be received and read on WAP-enabled Personal Digital Assistants (PDA) and iPads, thus dispensing the need for large print newspapers.

The Internet and its World Wide Web graphic interface are reaching a level of saturation and widespread adoption throughout the world. Thus, there is a need to explore the impact of this global system of networked computers on journalism and news consumers. The key characteristics of online news – hyper-textuality, interactivity, multi-mediality – have enhanced the ‘added value’ of news. It also provides three specific strategies for news reporting that may be used to further improve the potential of journalism online: annotative reporting, open-source journalism and hyper-adaptive news sites. Relative to traditional newspapers, Internet-based papers provide fewer cues about news story importance, giving readers more control over story selection (Tewksbury and Althaus, 2000).

Previously, the Internet was seen as a supplementary news medium to traditional print news. Online newspapers, websites and blogs were just alternative sources. In fact, at one point in time, blogs were seen as unreliable and not credible (Johnson and Kaye, 2004). Today, alternative media has become mainstream, with Internet news sites being far more popular than the print, which has suffered a decline in readership. Newspapers are being read by a smaller percentage of the population and the trend is unlikely to change. According to a 2008 survey by global market research company Synovate, 45% of Malaysian youths between 8 and 24 said they would use the Internet more often compared to the TV (22%), mobile phones (11%) and newspapers (7%) (Market Research World, 2009). They spend an average of 1.2 hours a day on e-mail, 1 hour and 36 minutes a day with online communities, 2 hours 48 minutes on instant messaging and 2 hours 36 minutes on other Internet activities (Adoi Magazine, 2009).

According to Wong (1998), Internet users in Malaysia can be divided into three categories – home users (60%), students (30%) and organisations (10%). Those with a

Table 2. Young Malaysians' media use

| Media Use | Percentage (%) | Internet activities | Time |
|---------------|----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Internet | 45 | E-mail | 1 hour 30 mins |
| TV | 22 | Online communities | 1 hour 36 mins |
| Mobile phones | 11 | Instant messaging | 2 hours 48 mins |
| Newspapers | 7 | Other Internet activities | 2 hours 36 mind |

Source: Market Research World (http://www.marketresearchworld.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2550&Itemid=77); Adoi Magazine 2009 (<http://202.75.43.26/index.php/news/153-news-2009/4068-survey-reveals-top-online-habits-of-malaysian-youth->)

Table 3. Demographic information of Internet users in Malaysia

| Categories of Internet users | Percentage (%) | Educational level of Internet users | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|
| Home | 60 | Higher education | 67 |
| Students | 30 | Diploma | 21 |
| Organisations | 10 | Secondary school | 11 |
| | | Primary school | 11 |

Source: Wong (1998); Marlin (2008)

higher education were the highest Internet users at 67%, followed by diploma holders (21%), secondary school (11%) and primary school (11%) (Marlin, 2008). The Malaysian society in the 21st century lives in a globalised era enveloped by science and technology and this pattern has changed due to globalisation (Rozinah, 2000). The researchers hope to explore online consumer behaviour and news reading patterns of youths as compared to traditional media and to examine the reasons for their preference.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Loo and Yeap (1998), the inherent features of the Internet and its interactive dimensions allow users to control the navigation of information. Thus, it enables users to source for various forms of information. In the world of urbanisation and globalisation, the advent of online news has helped reverse the trend of declining news consumption among young people. This is especially evident in most research conducted in China or the United States. However, recent findings indicate that young people are using mobile phones to download music, message and call. The Internet is also used mostly for chatting, e-mailing, blogging – in fact, doing everything else except accessing news (Mindich, 2005). This is a startling fact and one that is of concern to the researchers who are undertaking this study to determine if the same structure or patterns in news consumption can be generalised to Malaysian youths. According to Fallows (2004), adolescent access to the Internet may focus more on recreation and entertainment, similar to their use of other media such as radio and television.

During the 1990s, the Internet grew to be one of the most important technological advancements in society. It became so popular that people relied on it not just for work and

study but also entertainment and news. Online news is today's modern-type digital newspaper as it is no longer in printed format. Research has found that online audiences go to news websites to get information that is unavailable elsewhere. They also find it convenient to search for news on particular topics. Nozato (2002) points out that online media distinguish itself from traditional media because its users can browse not just text but also digital images. Online media can also present the most recent information and link related news articles from local to international. The Internet's interactive features imply that online media is more advantageous than traditional forms. In fact, some readers now see that the Internet is a good alternative to traditional media. More and more students, especially those who have higher educational levels, tend to believe online news more since they are used to new technology. Ascione (2006) mentions that for students and educators, judging the reliability of online information can pose a challenge.

In a survey to identify news consumption patterns in Ireland and the European Union (EU), O'Donnell (2003) found that in Ireland, 56% said they personally use the Internet. Of that number, 36% use it every day or nearly every day. The population percentage of Internet users in EU countries can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Population of EU countries who use the Internet daily or almost daily

| Countries | Percentage (%) | Countries | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| Denmark | 39 | Greece | 5 |
| Finland, Sweden | 34 | Portugal | 12 |
| Netherlands | 33 | Spain, Italy | 14 |

Source: O'Donnell (2003)

The survey found that of all EU Internet users, 71% used it to look for news or topical items. The most significant feature of Internet users is their youth (see Table 5).

Table 5. Percentage of Internet users by age group in the EU

| Age group | Percentage of Internet users (%) |
|--------------|----------------------------------|
| 15-24 | 81 |
| 25-39 | 64 |
| 40-54 | 51 |
| 55 and above | 17 |

Source: O'Donnell (2003)

Among daily Internet users, the age difference has become much less pronounced, with 38% between 15 and 24 using it daily or nearly every day compared to 34% aged 55 and over. Of those in the middle-aged group, 43% use it daily or nearly every day.

Table 6. Percentage of daily Internet users per age group in the EU

| Age group | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|----------------|
| 15-24 | 38 |
| 25-39 | 43 |
| 40-54 | 43 |
| 55 and above | 34 |

Source: O'Donnell (2003)

Another feature of Internet users is their high level of education as seen in Table 7.

Table 7. Level of education and Internet use in the EU

| End of education (Age) | Percentage of Internet use (%) | End of education (Age) | Percentage of daily Internet use (%) |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| ≥ 21 | 77 | ≥21 | 50 |
| ≤ 15 | 18 | ≤15 | 32 |

Source: O'Donnell (2003)

Gender is another significant feature of EU Internet users (Table 8).

Table 8. Gender and Internet use in the EU

| Internet activity/Gender | Male (%) | Female (%) |
|----------------------------------|----------|------------|
| Percentage of Internet use | 56 | 40 |
| Percentage of daily Internet use | 46 | 33 |

Source: O'Donnell (2003)

According to Laudon and Laudon (2000), the Internet provides so many benefits to the community such as global connectivity, ease of use, low cost, and multimedia capabilities. Pasek *et al.* (2006) found that media use, whether for information or entertainment, facilitates civic engagement. News media is especially effective in promoting political awareness. The researchers examined the role of mass media in young people between the ages of 14 and 22, and found that they had 12 different uses of the mass media, including awareness of current national politics and time spent on civic activities. Meanwhile, Bleakly *et al.* (2004:744) examined Internet use and the factors associated with online health information-seeking among a sample of youths aged between 15 and 30 years in New York city. Findings from street intercept surveys indicate substantial computer access at home (62%) and frequent (everyday or a few times a week) Internet use (66%). Meanwhile, 55% of the sample reported seeking health information on the Internet which was associated with positive beliefs about getting a health checkup and frequent Internet use.

According to Marlin (2008: 6), research has shown that Malaysia was ranked 19th in a list of 25 top countries with the highest number of Internet users. However, it was not on the list for highest user penetration. Records in 2005 showed 10,040,000 Internet users – 38% of the overall number of Malaysians. Largest numbers were recorded in Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Johor and Penang. Since 2000, Internet use in Malaysia has increased at a greater speed, almost 200%.

In 2008, Marlin conducted a study on Internet use by Indonesian students in University of Malaya. The purpose of the study was to examine the benefits of Internet use in information searching, as well as patterns and frequency in the learning process. The survey of 200 students found that Internet use was optimal and beneficial to their learning process (91%). The Internet is attractive and useful to the students because of its updated and global information. About 25 to 50% of information used was beneficial to their studies. They use the Internet every day, spending between two and four hours. Unfortunately, this study did not reveal where the students accessed their information from. In another study, Ali Salman *et al.* (2010), examined the factors that had positive and negative effects on the sustainable use of the Internet among Malay youths, and identified the predictor factors. The study found, from interviews of 225 respondents in Kota Bharu, Kelantan, that interpersonal and social networks, as well as perceived and realised benefits of the Internet have significant positive effects on the sustainability of its use. Issues relating to security concerns and interruptions have a significant negative effect. Therefore, factors which affect sustainability of usage should be given priority in the implementation of Internet and ICT-related projects.

Salman and Hasim's (2010) recent study on the patterns of Internet use of 303 Malays living in Kajang district found that e-mail was the main use of the Internet as a medium of communication (see Table 9). This pattern of Internet use among the respondents is very encouraging. According to Salman and Hasim (2010:13), one important use of the Internet is that of a news source. They said, "What this means is that the pattern of obtaining news by Internet users is changing and newspapers can't afford to miss the opportunity to have online presence."

In 1999, Pawanteh and Samsudin (2001) conducted a research on Internet use and the extent of media penetration among adolescents, by surveying 2,500 young people between the ages of 13 and 25, of which 516 were adolescents. The researchers explored the media environment and media use, and discovered that Internet use was a social event that is shared with peers. The Internet was more of an entertainment rather than educational tool. It gave the adolescents a sense of empowerment, freedom and collective belonging. The question now arises in this study if youths in institutes of higher learning have similar experiences,

Table 9. Internet use among Malays in Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia

| Internet Use | Percentage (%) |
|---|----------------|
| E-mail | 91.7 |
| Reading online news and searching for information | 85.8 |
| Hobbies, games, entertainment | 70.3 |
| Buying prepaid materials | 16.2 |

Source: Salman and Hasim (2010)

and if so, what are they doing online? What are the online news consumption patterns of urban youths?

3. METHODOLOGY

The research team began with one brain-storming session, followed by a focus group discussion with about 15 students to identify various possible online media use among post-secondary school students and their likely attitudes towards online media. These viewpoints were coded into a 15- to 20-minute questionnaire. A small-scale pilot run was conducted on the drafted questionnaire to sharpen the language and to ensure building a smooth rapport between the respondent and the interviewer. Subsequently, a large scale quantitative survey was conducted with this questionnaire.

The college student population changes so frequently from cohort to cohort that it did not allow the researchers time to access or build a sampling frame for probabilistic sampling. Hence, a quota sampling scheme was adopted for this survey. The sample of 1,000 interviewees entailed 9 public and 29 private institutions in the Klang Valley – chosen as it has the highest Internet penetration and largest college student population. Thus, Klang Valley youths can be deemed to be trend setters for Internet media use among Malaysian college students. The quotas were enforced by the field supervisors who controlled the ratio on gender, race and size of institution. The researchers also spread out the sample among major institutions such as Universiti Malaya (UM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) to ensure representativeness of the sample.

The data was captured directly into the SPSS format and scanned for errors with the SPSS frequency table functions before it proceeded to further analysis. For the online usage habit, the researchers mainly tabulated the frequency tables and correlated the usage pattern with the students' attributes to track their online usage behavioural pattern. As for their attitude towards online media, the researchers applied various data reduction techniques like factor analysis to extract the essential features of the respondents' mindset.

The sample of 1,000 respondents was equally distributed in terms of gender and conformed to the average age of undergraduate students – between 18 and 23 years old. The ethnicity and gender distribution can be seen in Tables 10 and 11. Among the Indians, the gender proportion is about equal. Table 12 shows the breakdown in terms of religion.

Two-thirds of the sample were from private colleges and universities (IPTS) in Malaysia, while the remaining one-third were from public institutes of higher education (IPTA). It is a known fact that private institutions have more non-Malay students, which is why the percentage of Chinese (50.3%) and Indian (17.1%) students sampled from the IPTS population is more than Malays (30.3%). For the IPTAs sampled, 78.9% were Malay students compared to 17.7% Chinese and 2.1% Indians.

Table 10. Ethnicity of respondents

| Ethnicity | Percentage (%) |
|-----------|----------------|
| Malay | 46.1 |
| Chinese | 39.6 |
| Indian | 12.3 |

Table 11. Respondents by ethnicity and gender

| Gender | Percentage (%) | Gender | Percentage (%) |
|---------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Malay Males | 17.9 | Chinese Males | 24.0 |
| Malay Females | 28.2 | Chinese Females | 15.6 |

Table 12. Respondents by religion(%)

| Religion | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|----------------|
| Muslim | 46 |
| Buddhists | 30 |
| Catholics/Christians | 10 |
| Hindus | 12 |

Table 13. Respondents by ethnicity and public/private institutes of higher education

| IPTA | Percentage (%) | IPTS | Percentage (%) |
|---------|----------------|---------|----------------|
| Malay | 78.9 | Malay | 30.2 |
| Chinese | 17.7 | Chinese | 50.3 |
| Indian | 2.1 | Indian | 17.1 |
| Others | 1.2 | Others | 2.4 |

Table 14. Respondents by educational level

| Educational Level | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|----------------|
| Master's | 3 |
| Bachelor's | 62 |
| Diploma | 28 |
| Certificate | 9 |

Table 15. Respondents by type of primary and secondary schools attended

| Type of Primary School | Percentage (%) | Type of Secondary School | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Kebangsaan | 67.2 | Kebangsaan | 75.9 |
| Jenis Kebangsaan | 32.7 | Jenis Kebangsaan | 6.6 |
| | | Religious schools | 5.0 |
| | | Private schools | 6.6 |
| | | Others | 5.4 |

The majority of the respondents are currently doing their undergraduate degree (62%), while 28% are pursuing their diploma. A small number (9%) are in the process of obtaining their certificate or Master's degree (3%).

The researchers also found that two-thirds of the respondents were from national primary schools (Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan) while the remaining one-third was from national-type primary schools (Sekolah Rendah Jenis Kebangsaan). After finishing primary education, the majority of the students (75.9%) continued their secondary education at national secondary schools (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan) (see Table 15).

4. FINDINGS

Since the respondents were youths in their late teens and early 20s, the majority (94.9%) own a computer, but still rely on traditional media to obtain news (93.8%). The newspaper is still the most favoured traditional medium to get news, followed by TV, then radio (see Table 16). Only 26% said that TV was the most important source of news, followed by newspapers and radio.

Table 16. Media choice of respondents

| Media Choice | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|----------------|
| Newspaper, Radio, TV | 11.9 |
| Newspaper, TV, Radio | 42.0 |
| Radio, Newspaper, TV | 5.3 |
| Radio, TV, Newspaper | 3.9 |
| TV, Newspaper, Radio | 26 |
| TV, Radio, Newspaper | 4.7 |

It is possible that the youths still rely on traditional newspapers because broadband speed is still relatively slow, and streaming of news and videos is still very inefficient in Malaysia. Since speed and convenience are important to youths, it could be much faster to read newspapers than go online.

The survey results clearly indicate that a high percentage (a total of 70%) of both male and female students go online daily. However, males are more hardcore users of the Internet because in a day, 61% of males go online approximately three to five times compared to 38.4% for their female counterparts. About 10% of females surf about one to two times a week, and this is also disproportionately higher than the male students who only make up 3% of those who surf infrequently.

Table 17. Gender and Frequency of Internet use by gender

| Frequency of Internet Use/Gender | Male (%) | Female (%) |
|----------------------------------|----------|------------|
| Use Internet 3-5 times a day | 61.0 | 38.4 |
| Use Internet 1-2 times a week | 3.0 | 10.0 |

However, the duration of time both sexes spend online is comparable. Between Chinese and Malay students, the amount of time spent online is also comparable at 46.3% and 41.2% respectively, as both groups tend to go online for longer periods of between 3 and 5 hours. Indians students, on the whole, spend only 1 to 2 hours when they are online at a much smaller percentage of 10.9% compared to the Malays and Chinese. In general, most Malay and Indian students tend to access the Internet away from home i.e. in university/college, cybercafé, Wifi hotspots. The Chinese students also access locations away from home but a proportionate amount spent online is within the home.

The students' activities online (in order of frequency) include surfing, e-mailing, updating and checking social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Friendster.

Other activities include chatting, reading and updating blogs or tweets, playing online computer games and posting in forums. While blogging/tweeting are activities that registered equally in terms of frequency for both sexes and also across ethnic groups, other activities indicated a marked difference across sex and ethnicity.

Surfing the Internet – the top activity among Klang Valley students (89%) – is mostly done by females (53.1%) compared to males (41.3%) – a 12% percentage point difference. In terms of ethnic differences, Chinese students (32%) tend to surf less than the Malays (42%). The high percentage of Internet surfing among students can be attributed to the fact that information search and research are their core activities. Since a higher percentage of females are Malay, it is possible to conclude that a higher proportion of Malay females surf the Internet compared to others.

Table 18. Surfing the Internet by gender and ethnicity

| Gender | Surfing the Internet (%) | Ethnicity | Surfing the Internet (%) |
|--------|--------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| Male | 53.1 | Chinese | 32 |
| Female | 41.3 | Malay | 42 |

Male students, unlike females, spend more time playing games online (34%) and posting on forums (26%) compared to females (18% and 20% respectively). Ethnic differences were less pronounced in online gaming – 12.7% of Chinese and 10% Malays engage in this leisure activity – and not significant among those posting on forums.

Table 19. Online games and posting on forums by gender

| Activity/Gender | Male (%) | Female (%) |
|----------------------|----------|------------|
| Playing online games | 34 | 18 |
| Posting on forums | 26 | 20 |

The Internet as a tool of communication is undisputed in the findings. E-mails and social network sites are among the top three student online activities. Gender and ethnic differences are either very small or not significant. Among female students themselves, 50.2% check e-mails very often, compared to 44.6% of male students who e-mail very often in their own gender category. There are no statistically significant differences between females and males when it comes to social networking sites but ethnic differences exist. Of the respondents who go on social networking sites very often, the majority are Malays (47.5%) followed by Chinese (37.7%) (see Table 20).

Table 16. E-mails and social networking by gender and ethnicity

| Gender/Activity | Checking e-mails very often (%) | Ethnicity/Activity | Access social networking sites very often(%) |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|--|
| Male | 44.6 | Malays | 47.5 |
| Female | 50.2 | Chinese | 37.7 |

Among those who chat online regularly, there is no significant statistical difference between the genders. However, a significant proportion of female respondents have never chatted before (76.7%) compared to males (23.3%). Chinese students tend to chat more than other ethnic groups. Of those who chat very often, Chinese students were the highest (48.1%), followed by Malays (36.4%) and Indians (13.7%). This finding is consistent with the percentage between IPTA and IPTS students because 64% of IPTS respondents chat compared to 52% of IPTAs.

Table 21. Chatting online by gender and ethnicity

| Gender/Chat | Never chatted before (%) | Ethnicity/Chat | Chat very often (%) |
|-------------|--------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Male | 23.3 | Malay | 36.4 |
| Female | 76.7 | Chinese | 48.1 |
| | | Indian | 13.7 |

E-mails, social networks and chats are very similar in that they provide a means for students to communicate. All three involve communication through writing; however, it is only via e-mails that longer tracts of private, written communication are given free reign. The findings indicate that females are predominantly e-mail users, which could be due to its lack of anonymity. E-mails are generally between two or more people who know each other, and it affords a more private, sustained correspondence compared to social networking sites or chat rooms. Although social networking sites do afford their participants some privacy, depending on the settings imposed by the users, the amount of text allowed is not unlimited. The more conversational nature of such sites is similar to that of chat rooms, although the latter is much more governed by the dictates of real time.

Chats can be anonymous, with private chat rooms available for those who do not want others to read their conversations. But the risk of danger is ever present. News stories about male perpetrators who use chat rooms to target and attack unsuspecting female victims are common. This could explain why female students, by and large, participate much less in online chats than their male counterparts. Females prefer the safety of e-mails, where both parties are more likely to know each other. There is also less interference from outside parties, unlike social network sites and chat rooms. Thus, more male students engage in chats, forums and social networking than females.

The activity that is least participated by students is online shopping. Across gender and ethnic lines, one in five youths have shopped online at least once, but close to two-thirds have never done so. Possible reasons could be lack of money. Online shopping requires shoppers to have access to credit cards or a payment account, e.g. PayPal, which students may not have. In some cases, parents may also discourage or disallow their children from shopping online, especially for those who are still below 21. Among the 8% who shop, the majority are Malays (54.5%) followed by Chinese (31.8%).

With regards to online news consumption, almost two-thirds (64%) of the respondents indicated that they read *Malaysiakini*, making it the most popular news website across all the ethnic groups. More than three-quarters (78.9%) of the Indian respondents read it,

followed by Malays (65.3%) and Chinese (57.6%). In fact, Malay (69.8%) and Indian (82%) men are more avid fans of *Malaysiakini* compared to Chinese (60.4%). A similar trend is found among Malay (62.4%) and Indian females (75%) compared to Chinese females (53.2%). It is clear from this finding that the Chinese readership of *Malaysiakini* is the lowest among the ethnic groups.

Table 22. Reading *Malaysiakini* by ethnicity and gender

| | Overall (%) | Males (%) | Females (%) |
|---------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| Malay | 65.3 | 69.8 | 62.4 |
| Chinese | 57.6 | 60.4 | 53.2 |
| Indian | 78.9 | 82.0 | 75.0 |

In general, readers of *Malaysiakini* go there to get very specific kinds of news i.e. socio-political. The high number of Indian readers could be due to the awakening of socio-political awareness in their community due to the Hindraf issue around the time when the survey was conducted (Oct-Dec 2009). Also, the Indian students may find that the mainstream press do not have sufficient coverage on issues relating to them, and therefore turn to the Internet to find news outlets that are relevant to their needs. Contrary to popular belief that youth rely a lot on blogs for information and news, the statistics show that on average, less than 30% refer to blogs, and this is true across all ethnic groups.

The results also show that more students (72.1%) in public institutions of higher learning (IPTA) read *Malaysiakini* compared to those (56.7%) in private institutions (IPTs), which is consistent with the ethnic data. IPTA students could be more exposed to socio-political issues during their campus elections, student councils and societies. Since *Malaysiakini* focuses on socio-political news and issues, it might relate to their interest. In comparison, IPTs students have more distractions, having to work part-time due to higher tuition fees and cost of living, and thus have less time to read news. They could also be apathetic because they are of a different social class and such news or issues are not so important to them. IPTs students may be living at home and spend a considerable amount of time travelling to campus, and thus have less time after class to hang out and chit-chat on campus. In comparison, the majority of the IPTA students are from out of state and live in centralised dorms on campus, which are cheaper compared to private housing outside campus. Thus, they have more time to spend within campus and are more involved in campus activities, whereas IPTs students may have to work in their spare time to earn extra money for their living and accommodation expenses.

Very few respondents read the other online news websites listed, for example, *Merdeka Review*, *Agenda Daily*, *The Nut Graph*, *Malaysian Insider* and even *Malaysia Today*. A cursory check on these websites revealed some possibilities as to why they are less appealing to youths. One possible reason could be the less appealing and less user friendly design of these websites and the prevalence of 'serious, heavy' news on Malaysian politics and economy, which may not appeal to youths. In comparison, *Malaysiakini* is the most established and well-known news website; it has a more user-friendly interface as well. Its

real-time live coverage especially during election results has given it an advantage compared to others. This inference is consistent with the findings from the survey which shows many students relied on *Malaysiakini* for the 2008 election coverage, across ethnic groups.

Surprisingly, youths are less likely to obtain news from blogs, forums or gossip sites. They still go online to read the news but many of these sites are actually online versions of the mainstream print media, rather than alternative news media. Examples include online print media such as *The Star*, *The Sun*, *NST*, *Utusan Malaysia*, *Berita Harian*, *Harakah*, *Sin Chew*, *China Press*, etc. Aside from these media channels, students also visit international news sites such as *MSN news*, *CNN*, *BBC*.

The main reason why the respondents prefer to get their news online is because they can get additional information not found elsewhere (56.1%). They also prefer online media because it gives them timely news (60.6%) and presents different views (47%). It would seem that students prefer substance (i.e. facts) over opinion or styles. This shows that what is lacking in mainstream media are facts or substance. Once the news website has sufficient facts, then design and style matters. Thus, it is not surprising that *Malaysiakini* is popular because it delivers updated facts and their webpage design is attractive enough to appeal to students.

Less important are interactivity, multimedia and critical style of writing. Students do not seem to see news as an arena for a two-way communication dialogue – it is more for information gathering rather than sharing. Generally, more men prefer online news due to multimedia (56.6% compared to women 43.4%). Perhaps males are more audio-visually oriented, which is why the multimedia function is important to them. Interestingly, among those who prefer multimedia and designated this as their top three reasons for online news preference, the majority were Chinese (47.5%), especially the males. In comparison, the Malay and Indian students prefer online news because of its timeliness (65.4% and 66% respectively).

When asked if they send links and/or forward online news/articles to other people, 65.6% said they did not. Of those who do forward links, most of them forward lifestyle articles (25.8%), followed by entertainment (25%) and politics (15%) and sports (15%).

Table 23. Forwarding online news and articles to others

| Forward online news/ articles to others | Percentage (%) | Types of online news/ articles forwarded | Percentage (%) |
|--|----------------|---|----------------|
| Yes | 34.4 | Lifestyle | 25.8 |
| No | 65.6 | Entertainment | 25 |
| | | Politics | 15 |
| | | Sports | 15 |

More men forward links on politics and sports (72.2%) than women (27.3%). Among those who forward links, Chinese students forward links more than others and a majority forward links on politics (39%) followed by lifestyle (21%), entertainment (7%) and business/economics (6%).

Table 24. Types of links forwarded

| Types of links forwarded | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------|----------------|
| Politics | 39 |
| Lifestyle | 21 |
| Entertainment | 7 |
| Business/Economics | 6 |

Those who send these links or forward these news articles do so because they want to share information (43%). Indian students forward mainly sport links (32%) and political links (30%). As the sample respondents were students, most were unwilling to pay to read news online (85%). Among the reasons given were that they are students and do not have much money. Some said that the news is already free, and do not see the necessity to pay. Of the 15% who said they were willing to pay, a large percentage were women (61.6%) compared to men (38.4%). More Malays were also willing to pay (60.9%) compared to other ethnic groups.

Table 25. Willingness to pay for online news by gender

| Pay to read online news | Percentage | Gender | Willing to pay for online news |
|-------------------------|------------|--------|--------------------------------|
| Yes | 85% | Men | 38.4% |
| No | 15% | Women | 61.6% |

Overall, 40% were willing to pay RM10 or less per month, while 24% were willing to pay between RM20 and RM30 monthly. Another 20% would pay between RM10 and RM19 a month, but only a minority of 9% would pay above RM30.

Table 26. Monthly subscription to online news

| Monthly Amount | Percentage (%) |
|------------------|----------------|
| <RM10 | 40 |
| RM10<amount<RM19 | 20 |
| RM20<amount<RM30 | 24 |
| >RM30 | 9 |

5. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

It is not surprising that an overwhelming majority of respondents own a computer (95%) and access it daily. This is consistent with Wong's (1998) and O'Donnell's (2003) findings that those with higher education were the highest Internet users. What is surprising is that despite the constant exposure to the Internet, Malaysian urban youths still rely on traditional media to obtain news (94%). One possibility could be because broadband speed is still relatively slow and wi-fi access is still not widespread for people to access online news on the go. Thus, for the youth, it is more convenient to pick up the newspapers to read when

they are outside the home. Interestingly, male students are more hardcore Internet users (61%) than females (38.4%) as they go online more frequently – up to five times daily. This situation is similar to that of the EU where more men use the Internet more frequently compared to women (O'Donnell, 2003). Chinese (46.3%) and Malay (41.2%) students tend to spend more time on the Internet compared to Indian students (10.9%). Malay and Indian students also tend to access the Internet away from home, for example, at their university or college, cybercafés or wi-fi hotspots whereas Chinese students use the Internet at home.

When they are accessing the World Wide Web, the students' top activities are surfing, e-mailing and checking social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Friendster. Other activities include chatting, reading and updating blogs or tweets, playing online computer games and posting in forums. This phenomenon is very similar to what is happening abroad. Mindich's (2005) findings indicate that the Internet is used mostly for chatting, e-mailing, and blogging – doing everything except accessing news. According to Fallows (2004), adolescents who access the Internet focus more on recreation and entertainment, which is consistent with the youths in the Klang Valley.

The study also found gender differences in terms of Internet use. More females surf the Internet for information compared to males who prefer to play online games and post on forums. Malay students also tend to surf the Internet more than Chinese. Since a higher percentage of females were Malay, it is possible to conclude that a higher proportion of Malay females surf the Internet compared to others. This corresponds to Marlin's 2008 study on Indonesian undergraduates in Universiti Malaya whereby the respondents found that the Internet was optimal and beneficial to their learning process due to its updated and global information.

E-mails and social networking sites are the most popular online activities among the respondents. The researchers found that females also use email more often than males. This is not surprising given Ali Salman *et al.*'s (2010) study which found inter-personal and social networks have a significant positive impact on Internet use. Salman and Hasim's (2010) study of Internet use among urban Malays also found that e-mail is the most popular use of the Internet, followed by reading online newspapers and information searching. When it comes to social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, Malay students tend to enjoy this activity more than Chinese. Pawanteh and Samsudin (2001) found that the Internet is a social event that is shared with peers. The youths also chat online but more male students indulge in this activity rather than females. In fact, the study found quite a significant number of female students who have not chatted before. Females probably prefer e-mail to communicate as the risk of chatting with strangers could compromise their personal safety. It is also possible that females generally have more real time, face-to-face communication with friends, whereas males prefer to hide behind the safety of the computer screen. Chinese students tend to chat more than Malays or Indians, consistent with the percentage of IPTA students who chat more than IPTS. IPTS students have more real-time contact in campus, reducing the need to chat online.

Most students do not shop online. Of those who do, there were more Malays than Chinese or Indians. This is consistent with Salman and Hasim's 2010 study of Kajang residents where only 16.2% use the Internet to buy prepaid materials.

Consistent with the trend as indicated in the 2008 research conducted by the Pew Research Centre for People and the Press, online news websites can no longer be considered as 'new media' but are firmly part of the mainstream. Thus, it is not surprising that *Malaysiakini* was the favourite online news source. In fact, Malay and Indian students are more avid fans compared to Chinese. More IPTA students read *Malaysiakini* compared to their counterparts in private institutions. One reason why they prefer online news is because they can get additional information that is not found elsewhere, as well as timely news that presents different views. This view is echoed in Deacon's (2007) findings that the availability of digital news archives enable people to quickly access large bodies of information. Online news can also lure readers away from print media because of the immediacy and impact of its news. The students were not so concerned about opinions or presentation styles. Hence, the lack of facts or substance in mainstream traditional media has been driving consumers towards online news. It is no wonder that *Malaysiakini*, which provides additional timely information which is different from mainstream traditional media, has become so popular. This corresponds to a Nielsen/Net Ratings survey in 2000 where it found that online news readership increased during the Sept 11 tragedy and Iraq war where people turned to the Internet for supplementary information which television and print could not offer. Interestingly, students hardly get their news from blogs, forums or gossip sites, or other alternative news websites like *Merdeka Review* or *Malaysian Insider*. Instead, another important news source is the online versions of mainstream print media. This could be linked to the students' level of familiarity with mainstream newspapers as a source of information, which drives them to seek the same source online rather than seek new pastures.

According to Laudon and Laudon (2000), the Internet provides so many benefits such as ease of use, global connectivity, low cost and multimedia capabilities. Surprisingly, the Internet's interactivity and multimedia functions are not features that attract the students, who use the Internet more for information-gathering. This again corresponds to findings by Marlin (2008). Salman and Hasim (2010) also found that other than e-mail, their respondents used the Internet for reading online newspapers and searching for information. In this study, the researchers found that generally, Chinese men prefer online news due to its multimedia functions, compared to Malays and Indians.

Most of the students do not forward links to others. If they do, it is usually on lifestyle and entertainment, followed by politics and sports – usually men. Chinese students forward the most links on politics followed by lifestyle. Indian students forward mainly sports and political links. The reason why they forward links is because they want to share the information that they found with their friends – similar to Pawanteh and Samsudin's (2001) findings that Internet use is a social event that is shared with peers. With regard to payment for online news, it is not surprising that they were unwilling to pay. As students with tight budgets, they are already getting most of their news for free and do not see the need to pay. Of those who were willing to pay, more were women from the Malay community. This shows that the educated Malay woman is a force to be reckoned with in the near future as they are willing to pay to be informed and educated.

The development and larger availability of information and activities on the Internet seem to offer youths not only the opportunity for quick access, which supersedes the news

delivery of traditional print medium in terms of immediacy and impact, but also acts as a powerful lure that continually draws readers because of its ability to connect with other people and bridge divides, leading to an even playing field. Today's growth of blogs and online news websites have given youths the opportunity to pick and choose information that suit their personal gratification. It is surprising to note that even with the proliferation of online news websites, Malaysian youths still rely on traditional media to obtain news. Hence, it is not 100% migration to new media, unlike in the US and Europe. Online media is still not mainstream in Malaysia. Students' access of online news is still very much one-way communication – to get facts, not to interact nor dialogue.

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Dr Carmen Nge is currently Assistant Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Creative Industries at UniversitiTunku Abdul Rahman. She received her PhD in Literature from Brandeis University, USA.

Pauline Leong Pooi Yin is a PhD candidate with Monash University Sunway. Her research area is the impact of new media on politics and communication in Malaysia. Pauline has previously taught at UniversitiTunku Abdul Rahman. She obtained her Masters in Mass Communication from Nanyang Technological University.

Sharon Wilson is a lecturer with the Department of Mass Communications, Faculty of Creative Industries, UniversitiTunku Abdul Rahman. She is nearing completion of her doctoral studies at UniversitiKebangsaan Malaysia. She obtained both her Masters and Bachelor of Arts from Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Dr Ngerng Miang Hong is the Head of Research and Innovation at the Faculty of Management and Information Technology, UCSI University. He received his PhD in Economics from University of Western Ontario, Canada. Dr. Ngerng was a Fellow Member of the Royal Statistical Society (FRSS) in UK (1988 – 1995).

