Engaging and Empowering News Audiences Online:

A Feature Analysis of Nine Asian News Websites

Abstract

The Web features hypertexts, interactivity and multimedia. Innovative use of Web features has brought about new features such as Blog, Podcast, Vodcast, Wiki, Flash, RSS, and Instant Messenger in designing and delivering news online. Web features are designed to allow greater Web user participation, user-generated content, and Web-user-friendly online environments. In short, Web features can engage and empower Web users. This paper presents the results of a comparative feature analysis of nine news websites in Asia in measuring engagement and empowerment efforts taken by these news websites.

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Brief Review of Earlier Studies

It was predicted earlier that Web features would change rules and forms of online journalism and publishing (Pavlik, 1999). It was also observed that different skills would be employed in news designing and delivering (Phipps, 1999). Between prediction and reality, however, there is always a gap. As a major online feature, interactivity was found to be almost non-existent in news websites. There was hardly any interaction with online readers in the early stage of online journalism (Riley et al., 1998; Schultz, 1999). And the issue remained largely unsolved (Oblak, 2005). Besides interactivity, news websites are also supposed to allow more user involvement. Unfortunately, user involvement remained seriously lacking or missing (Shyam, 2000). The same situation existed when it came to use of multimediality in news websites due to bandwidth limitation and copyrights (Deuze, 2001; Nerone & Barnhurst, 2001). And hypertextuality was not adequately employed by news websites (Oblak, 2005). Earlier studies were largely country-specific and feature-specific in that they focused on one or two features in one country.

Research Questions and Methods

In this study, however, a comparative investigation was conducted of nine English language news websites, one from each of the following Asian countries: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Thailand, Japan, South Korea and China. And instead of examining only one or two dominant features, this study investigated a full range of Web features available so far, which was generated from a comprehensive search of online journalism textbooks, research articles on online journalism, as well as news websites of leading news media in the world such as *CNN*, *BBC*, *International Herald Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*. And a codebook was designed on the basis of the list of Web features. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What Web features do selected Asian news websites use?

RQ2: To what extent do they use Web features?

RQ3: What are the differences among them in using Web features?

For the comparative examination, the following nine English language newspaper websites were selected: (a) *The Straits Times Interactive* (Singapore), (b) *The New Straits Times* (Malaysia), (c) *The Jakarta Post* (Indonesia), (d) *Philippines Daily Inquirer* (Philippines), (e) *The Bangkok Post* (Thailand), (f) *The Times of India* (India), (g) *The Japan Times* (Japan), (h) *The Korea Herald* (South Korea), and (i) *The China Daily* (China). As the leading national English language newspaper websites in these countries under investigation, they can indicatively show Web feature usage in their respective countries.

For the comparative feature analysis, three research assistants were hired. They were trained prior to coding before they conducted a pilot coding followed by one more training session. And the intercoder reliability (the Holsti's formula) between the coders reached between .87 and .98. And the coding session was conducted on September 6, 2007. The research assistants first coded the homepage and then the Web page of the top story of each of the nine news websites.

Web features available for use on the homepage can fall into the following five categories of Web features: (a) Customization, (b) Interactivity, (c) Multimedia, (d) User Friendly Services, and (e) Additional Delivery Channels.

A homepage can be customized according to online users' preferences in any of the following four areas: (a) page layout (number of columns and sections or placement of navigation bars and content, etc.), (b) page format (pure text, low graphic, high graphic, or multimedia), (c) other language edition, (d) content selection (customize homepage content by either adding what they want to read or deleting what readers do not want to read). Any other item found to be present that does not fit anywhere on the list of coding items is recorded as "Others" and should be specified. This applies to all other coding categories on both homepages and story pages. Interactivity can be said to exist if any of the following eight items are available: (a) online live chat, (b) contact us, (c) email byline, (d) online poll, (e) blogging, (f) message boards, (g) forums, and (h) provide news tips. Multimedia is measured against the following six items: (a) video clippings, (b) audio clippings, (c) slide shows,

(d) photos, (e) graphics, and (f) animation. Web services can be available in the following 10 areas: (a) news alerts, (b) list of top stories, (c) e-commerce, (d) search engines, (e) archives, (f) online translation, (g) story clippings, (h) podcast, (i) vodcast, and (j) Web specials. Table 1 shows the available Web features on the homepage.

Table 1   Web Features on the Homepage

Categories	Web Features
Customization (4)	(1) Page layout, (2) page format, (3) other language edition, and (4) content selection
Interactivity (8)	(1) Online live chat, (2) contact us, (3) email byline, (4) online poll, (5) blogging, (6) message boards, (7) forums, and (8) provide news tips
Multimedia (7)	(1) Video clippings, (2) audio clippings, (3) Vodcast, (4) Podcast, (5) slide shows, (6) photos, and (7) graphics
User Friendly Services (10)	(1) News alerts, (2) list of top stories, (3) e-commerce, (4) search engines, (5) archives, (6) online translation, (7) story clippings, (8) podcast, (9) vodcast, and (10) Web specials.
Additional Delivery Channels (3)	(1) Mobile, (2) email newsletters, and (3) RSS
Total	32 Web features

For each news website, only the page of the top story of the coding day was analyzed. And the storypage was examined by coding the following six major categories of Web features: (a) customization, (b) interactivity, (c) multimedia in the story, (d) multimedia next to the story, (e) user friendly services, and (f) hypertext.

Story customization can be found in the following three areas: (a) test size (increase or decrease font size), (b) column format (single column or multiple columns), and (c) story format (text, low graphic, high graphic, or multimedia). Interactivity on the story page exists in the form of the following two areas: email the story byline and provide news tips. Multimedia can be identified in the following items either within or next to the story: (a) video, (b) audio, (c) vodcast, (d) podcast, (e) slide shows, (f) photos, and (g) graphics. User-friendly services can be located in the

following: (a) translate the story, (b) listen to the story, (c) blog the story, (d) email the story, (e) IM the story, (f) rate the story, (g) save the story, (h) comment on the story, and (i) contribute reader's version of the story. Hypertext can be present either within or next to the story. Table 2 shows the Web features that can be used on the storypage.

Table 2   Web Features on the Storypage

Categories	Web Features
Customization (3)	(1) Text size, (2) column format, and (3) story format
Interactivity (2)	(1) Byline email and (2) provide news tips
Multimedia in the story (5)	(1) Video clippings, (2) audio clippings, (3) slide shows, (4) photos, and (5) graphics
Multimedia next to the story (7)	(1) Video clippings, (2) audio clippings, (3) slide shows, (4) photos, (5) graphics, (6) Vodcast, and (7) Podcast.
User Friendly Services (9)	(1) Translate the story, (2) listen to the story, (3) blog the story, (4) email the story, (5) IM the story, (6) rate the story, (7) save the story, (8) comment on the story, and (9) contribute reader's version of the story
Hypertext (2)	Hypertext in the story and hypertexts next to the story
Total	28 Web features

Results

The first Web feature that online users will be expecting is to customize what to read, what to read first, how to read it, when and where to read it, in what format, and in what language. Such advantage, however, has not been fully utilized on the homepages of the selected news websites. Only four out of nine news websites (*Jakarta Post*, *New Straits Times*, *Times of India* and *Inquirer*) did allow their users to customize homepage format. But choices were very limited even among these four. *Jakarta Post* and *Inquirer* allowed their respective visitors to switch to PDF format while *New Straits Times* and *Times of India* offered e-Paper or digital paper version. None of nine news websites under study allowed their Web visitors to customize page layout, language edition or content (see Table 3).

Table 3   Homepage Customization

Customization	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Customize Page Layout	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Customize Page Format	-	-	+	+	-	-	-	+	+
Customize Language Edition	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Customize Content	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

In terms of storypage customization, no better situation was found with only three websites allowing their readers to customize text size (*Straits Times*, *Korea Herald*, and *Inquirer*). None of the nine news websites allowed their readers to change story format or customize what they want to read on the Web (see Table 4).

Table 4   Storypage Customization

Customization	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Customize Text Size	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+
Customize Story Format	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Customize Column Format	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

A common form of interactivity is "Contact Us", which was present on the homepage of all the websites. But only four out of nine news websites (*Straits Times*, *Bangkok Post*, *China Daily* and *Times of India*) had "Online

Poll". Only *Straits Times*, *Bangkok Post*, *China Daily* and *Korea Herald* had "Forum" while only *New Straits Times*, *Times of India* and I*nquirer* had "blogging". And only Straits Times offered a function to allow its readers to provide news tips. None of the nine news websites offered online live chat, Email byline, or message board (see Table 5).

Table 5   Homepage Interactivity

Interactivity	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Online Live Chat	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Contact Us	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Email Byline	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Online Poll	+	+	-	-	-	+	-	+	-
Blogging	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	+	+
Message Boards	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Forums	+	+	-	-	-	+	+	-	-
Provide News Tips	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	4	3	1	2	1	3	2	3	2

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

When it comes to storypage interactivity, only *Japan Times* and *China Daily* allowed their respective readers to email news story bylines. And none of the nine news websites allowed their respective visitors to provide news tips for follow up coverage (see Table 6).

Table 6   Storypage Interactivity

Interactivity	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Provide News Tips	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Email Byline	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	-
Total	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

One of the most exciting Web features is for news websites to use multimedia in designing, packaging and delivering news online. Only *Straits Times* had all the multimedia elements present on its website while the rest used only 1-3 multimedia elements (see Table 7).

Table 7   Homepage Multimedia

Multimedia	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Video	+	-	-	+	-	+	-	+	-
Audio	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+
Vodcast	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Podcast	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+
Slide Shows	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-
Photos	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Graphics	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	7	2	1	2	1	3	1	2	3

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

As shown in Table 8, different multimedia elements had not been used in telling a news story except for one of two elements such as photos or slide shows. Multimedia presentation of news, one of the key features that can be

used to distinguish online journalism from the traditional one, was non-existent on the nine news websites.

Table 8   Storypage Multimedia within the Story

Multimedia within the Story	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Video	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Audio	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Slide Shows	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-
Photo	-	-	-	-	+	+	+	-	-
Graphics	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

Another Web feature is to use different multimedia elements to accompany the story to provide additional information and backgrounders. Such a feature, however, has not fully utilized by the nine news websites. As a common element on the web, photos were only used by three out of nine (*Japan Times*, *China Daily* and *Times of India*) and slide shows were used only by one news website, *Japan Times*. The rest of the multimedia elements were not used at all by these news websites (see Table 9).

Table 9   Storypage Multimedia Next to the Story

Multimedia Next to the Story	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Video	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Audio	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Vodcast	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Podcast	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Slide Shows	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-
Photo	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	-
Graphics	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

One of the most unique features that the Web offers on the homepage is the ability to use many user-friendly services to engage and empower online users. The commonly used features are (a) "Search Engines" (used by all of the nine websites), (b) "Archives" (used by eight) and (c) "List of Top Stories" (used by six). Features used include (a) "News Alert" (used by three only: *Straits Times*, *Bangkok Post* and *China Daily*), (b) "List of Popular Stories" (used by one only, *China Daily*), (c) "List of Most viewed Stories" (used by one only, *Times of India*), (d) "List of Most Emailed Stories" (used by two only, *Times of India* and *Inquirer*), (e) "Online Translation Service" (used by one only, *Korea Herald*), and (f) "Saved Story Folder" (used by one only, *Times of India*). But none of the nine news websites ever used "Contribute Stories Online" (see Table 10).

Table 10 Homepage User-Friendly Services

User-Friendly Services	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Contribute stories online	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
News alerts	+	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	-
Search Engines	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
List of top stories	+	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	+
List of popular stories	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-
List of most viewed stories	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-
List of most emailed stories	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	+
Archives	+	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+
Online translation services	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
Saved stories folder	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-
Total	4	4	2	2	3	4	3	6	4

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

On the storypage, the most commonly used feature is to allow readers to print news stories (used by all nine news websites), followed by "Email the Story" (used by eight) and "Comment on the Story" (used by five). But only one website uses "Save the Story". And it is the same with "Listen to the Story" and "Rate the Story". None of these nine news websites allow their readers to translate, blog, or IM (Instant Messenger) news stories (see Table 11).

Table 11 Storypage User-Friendly Services

User-Friendly Services	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Translate the story	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Listen to the story	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
Blog the story	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Email the story	+	+	-	+	+	+	+	+	+
IM the story	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Rate the story	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-
Save the story	-	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	-
Comment on the story	-	-	+	-	+	+	-	+	+
Contribute reader's version of the story	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Print the story	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Total	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	4	3

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

One of the distinguishing features that have set news websites apart from traditional news media is the use of hypertext. Ironically, it has not bee fully utilized by the news websites. As shown in Table 12, no hypertext was used within the story. In other words, no additional information, explanation, background information, etc. were added to story through hyperlinks although hypertexts were quite commonly used next to the story.

Table 12   Storypage Hypertext

Hypertext	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Hypertexts in the story	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hypertexts next to the story	+	-	+	-	+	+	-	+	+
Total	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

In terms of news delivery, the Web allows online news operations additional channels or platforms to deliver news such as mobile, Email newsletters and RSS. Among the nine news websites, only *New Straits Times* and *Inquirer* disseminated news via the additional platform of mobile. Email newsletters were available only *Straits Times*, *Japan Times*, *China Daily* and *Korea Herald* while RSS used by *Straits Times*, *Bangkok Post*, *New Straits Times* and *Japan Times* (see Table 13).

Table 13   Delivery Channel

Delivery Channel	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Mobile	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	+
Email Newsletters	+	-	-	-	+	+	+	-	-
RSS	+	+	-	+	+	-	-	-	-
Total	2	1	0	2	2	1	1	0	1

Legend: + = presence of a Web feature, - = absence of a Web feature

In summary, on the homepage, all the nine news websites do not use any of the following Web features: (a) to customize page layout, (b) to customize

language editions, (c) to customize content, (d) online live chat, (e) email story byline, (f) blogging, (g) and contribute stories online. So only seven out of 32 Web features are actually used, less than one third of the total. And the most commonly used Web features are as follows (the number in brackets indicates the number of news websites using the feature): (a) contact us (9), (b) photos (9), (c) search engines (9), (d) archives (8), and (e) list of top stories (6). The rest of the Web features are used only 1-4 news websites.

On the storypage, the situation is worse with more than a half of the Web features being not used. And the most commonly used Web features are (the number in brackets indicates the number of news websites using the feature): (a) print the story (9), (b) email the story (8), (c) hypertexts next to the story (6), and (c) comment to the story (5). The rest of Web features are used by only 1-3 news websites.

The results of the comparative analysis of Web feature usage on the nine news websites show that all of these sites share one thing in common, which is lack of user engagement and empowerment. Users are not allowed to customize webpage layout, language edition, or content. Nor are they allowed to contribute stories online or chat online with webmasters, reporters or editors. Another common thing among them is that they have not fully utilized user-friendly services of "news alerts", "list of popular stories", "list of most viewed stories", "list of most emailed stories", and "saved story folder". Still another shared feature is that they are insufficient in using multimedia in designing, packaging and presenting news stories, not to mention integrated use of multimedia (see Table 14).

Table 14   Homepage Web Feature Usage on Nine Asian News Websites

Web Features	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Customization	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1
Interactivity	4	3	1	2	1	3	2	3	2
Multimedia	7	2	1	2	1	3	1	2	3
User Friendly Services	4	4	2	2	3	4	3	6	4
Delivery Channels	2	1	0	2	2	1	1	0	1
Total	17	10	5	9	7	11	7	12	11
Usage Level	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium

Notes: Customization: (4 features), Interactivity: (8), Multimedia: (7),
User-Friendly Services (10), Delivery Channels: (3).
Low = 1-10, medium = 11-19, high = 20 and above

User engagement and empowerment are also absent on the storypage. Non-existent either within or next to a story are story format customization, column format customization, news tips for reporters to follow up on a story, video, audio, vodcast, podcast or graphics used. Another thing they share on the storypage is that they do not allow their readers to contribute their own versions of the story, translate or blog the story. Other user friendly services such as "listen to the story", "IM the story", "rate the story", and "save the story" are also barely used (see Table 15).

Table 15   Storypage Web Feature Usage on Nine Asian News Websites

Web Features	Straits Times	Bangkok Post	Jakarta Post	New Straits Times	Japan Times	China Daily	Korean Herald	Times of India	Inquirer
Customization	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Interactivity	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Multimedia within a Story	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	0
Multimedia Next to a Story	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	1	0
User Friendly Services	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3
Hypertextuality	1	0	1	0	1	1	0	1	1
Total	4	2	3	3	9	7	5	5	5
Usage Level	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low

Notes: Customization: (3), Interactivity: (2), Multimedia within a story: (5),
Multimedia next to a Story: (7), User-Friendly Services: (9), Hypertextuality: (2).
Low = 1-9, medium = 10-18, high = 19 and above

The nine news websites do not differ that much in using Web features except for the fact that *Straits Times*, the only fee-charged news website, tends to be more multimedia-oriented and interactive than other news websites while *Times of India* seems to use more user-friendly services.

Discussion

The results of the comparative analysis of Web feature usage show that more Web features were used on the homepage than on the story page. It discloses the common practice among news websites to use comparatively more showcase features on homepages without taking the trouble of using more engaging and empowering features.

And such a practice is largely driven by the common mentality among most newspapers of treating online outlets as a promotional tool to promote offline

newspapers online and thus to increase their circulation and readership (Foo et al, 1999).

Another factor is lack of well-trained online journalists. Asian online journalists have not received any substantial and solid training in online journalism and publishing. Most of them are simply transferred from the tradition newsroom to the online newsroom without any or little further training in Web journalism.

Still another factor may be the internal competition. The moment you go online, you make yourself a rival of your parent company, leading to internal competition between online and offline versions. If you offer everything online free and make it available to all, they will naturally stop buying or subscribing your offline newspapers or switch off TV and watch online television programs. It is the internal competition that has probably stopped news media from putting more efforts to fully utilize Web features in designing and delivering news online.

In most cases, average online users log on to any website to consume online content for education or entertainment, with the expectation of everything being free. If you charge them, they will click away. But for online exclusives, it takes time, energy and other resources to produce something that is exclusive online and it cannot be free. It is not free either to produce multimedia content for online consumption. Therefore, the everything-online-free mentality has dampened the enthusiasm to employ as many online features as possible to make it a truly multimedia communication in the cyberspace.

The limited use of Web features is also due to the underdeveloped information and communication technology infrastructures in Asia. Most home computers remain on dial-up and slow connection. Broadband is still something luxury in much of Asia. In such an environment, you cannot run high graphics version of your website. Such restrictions have stopped webpage designers and webmasters to design and maintain a website full of Web features ranging from interactivity to multimediality.

Last but not least, priorities in development and online culture also contribute to the problem. For most of news media in Asia, their priorities remain on

offline news communication. Furthermore, there is still lack of multimedia, non-linear, engaging, and empowering culture among online users and communicators.

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