

Virtual Southeast Asia? The Web, Students and Researchers

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Almost three decades ago, when my professor and first ‘employer’ assigned my first academic work, one of his pieces of advice was to never begin a presentation or paper with an apology. I have usually adhered to this advice. For this paper, however, I feel that I need to include some words of explanation regarding the motivation for the paper.

First, I am not an expert in the area I presume to write about. I am no more than an interested teacher and researcher who sees a need to incorporate Internet-based resources into Southeast Asian studies.

Second, my emphasis on Southeast Asia is simply an example. Many of the points I will set out could be made for any of the social science disciplines or, indeed, any of the area studies.

Third, my own experience of using Web-based materials in research is limited. A survey of my past publications indicated that it was only in late 1996 that I began to include Internet-accessed materials. In teaching, I have not been at the forefront of the technology either. I began to direct students to Web-based resources from about 1996. Having spent much time working in distance education, however, my use of email in teaching goes back further, although it was only in 1998 that I introduced email discussion groups for students.

So why am I writing on a topic for which I have so few qualifications? My excuse is that I want to explain my interest in using the Internet in teaching and research on Southeast Asia, and to suggest some of the problems the *average* teacher and researcher will face. I feel that my experience is representative of the experience of many of my

colleagues in Southeast Asian Studies. In other words, I am presenting something of a case study.

RESEARCH

My research experience with electronic resources has probably been similar to many others. While I was ‘connected’ fairly early, I tended to rely on paper-based research materials for some time after I was able to access Internet-based materials. In part this reflected a relative lack of materials on Thailand (my particular country interest) and Southeast Asia. I began with materials from newspapers and magazines. This was often through SEASIA-L, where nice folks seemed to spend hours scanning newspapers from the region and posting them on the email list. This meant that I could get materials that used to take months to arrive (by sea mail), within a week or so of publication. But I was not getting the whole newspaper or magazine, just those articles that caught the interest of those with the time and energy to do the posting.

By the mid-1990s, however I found that I was increasingly relying on the Net for research materials. Newspapers, magazines, the IMF, World Bank, NGOs, the Government of Thailand, academics and others were posting useful material on web sites. These were not finding their way to SEASIA-L, which seems to have gone from 20 to 30 messages a day to just one to two. This reflected the greater availability of Web-based materials and the Web's easier access.

This transition has convinced me that the new generation of researchers will increasingly turn to Web sites as their first stop when beginning a project.

TEACHING

My teaching experience has been similar. A few years ago, working in an Australian university considered a significant distance education provider, there was the view that web-based teaching would replace us. There developed a kind of love-hate relationship with electronic resources – we felt we needed to use them to remain attractive to students, but questioned if we were sending ourselves to an early retirement.

I avoided Web-based teaching, but introduced Web materials into my courses – the immediacy of news from the region and the increased availability of illustrations began to make these materials attractive in dealing with students who had little experience of Southeast Asia. This was followed by the introduction of an email discussion group for students, ninety percent of whom were studying by distance. This innovation was thought to be a way of overcoming some of the isolation we understood that many of these students felt during their studies.

My Australian students quickly took up the use of Web-based materials in completing their assignments. Some fifty percent of them referred to such sources in essays marked in 2000. However the experience with the discussion group was negative. Almost none used it, preferring the telephone or email to communicate with lecturers, not, it seems, feeling particularly isolated from their peers; or at least not feeling that a discussion group was able to overcome such isolation.

Teaching in Hong Kong has been a somewhat different experience. In my limited experience at the City University of Hong Kong I have found students keen to use Web-based and electronic materials, and they regularly use email to ‘talk’ with me, perhaps preferring this to speaking on the phone. I understand that our students like to use chat groups far more than my Australian students.

So my unremarkable conclusion has been that Web-based materials are to be of increasing significance for teachers of Southeast Asian studies. But there are also a number of issues that are somewhat troubling.

ISSUES

Access and equity

We know from various surveys that Internet usage has soared to some 250 million on-line. We know too that about 20-25 percent of these users are in Asia, rising rapidly. In Hong Kong about 36 percent of households are connected, an increase of 300 percent in two years (*South China Morning Post*, 26 Dec 2000).

We also know that access, while expanding, remains privileged. Women appear to have much less access than men, a pattern that seems to hold in most places. In China, for example, only 7-10 percent of users are women. While English remains the main language of the Internet, this also limits access.¹

Our students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at CityU are *potentially* disadvantaged. Surveys show that more than 60 percent of our student intake live in subsidised housing. More than three-quarters of our students are women. Typically they come from families where 50-60 percent of parents have no education beyond primary school. Only one in ten have a father who studied beyond secondary school, and one in fifty have a mother who did this. About half come from families with monthly incomes less than HK\$20,000 per month. Some 20 percent of them do not have their own study desk (Student Development Service, 2000).

These profiles suggest the potential for limited computer access, especially at home. However, as a newcomer I have been struck by the remarkable efforts made by CityU to give students access to computers and access to the Internet. This determination to ensure access is, I would suggest, a most significant step in preparing students for their futures.

Surveys indicate that most of our students emphasise the importance of enhancing their career and academic skills during their time at CityU (Statistical Consulting Unit, 2000). Combine this with the University's efforts to provide access, then it is incumbent upon academics to encourage students to use the Internet's resources in their studies. And this is far more than the presentation of study materials using WebCT and the like. Rather, we need to have students learn how to access and use the resources of the Internet. This is likely to become an important employment and life skill, if not already.

Another aspect of equity can be mentioned as something that researchers and students need to remember – i.e. Matthew Ciolek's (1998a) observation at the PNC in Taipei, that Southeast Asia is not yet a major producer of Web-based material about Southeast Asia.

¹ <http://www.learningpartnership.org/stats.html>

This means that most of the information on Southeast Asia is posted from outside the region. This is changing, but students and researchers need to be aware of potential biases caused by this lack of access. Even where there is access - whether to Southeast Asians in the region or overseas - there is a bias towards the wealthy.

Information: Overload and Evaluation

While I have encouraged students to use Web-based resources, I have begun to include the following comment in my course outlines:

'a word of warning regarding materials from the Internet. In referring students to books and articles, we can be reasonably confident that these materials have been subject to 'peer review'. This usually means that other experts in the field have reviewed them. This is not always the case with materials on the Internet. In fact, almost anyone can put his or her thoughts on a page and have it 'published'. Therefore, you must be careful in using such materials. Just because you find something on the Web does not make it right or even reasonable. So you need to develop your critical skills to be able to assess the relative worth of these materials. University students are expected to develop such skills. Be careful to check Web-based materials against other published works.'

I make this point even though we do suggest a list of appropriate Web sources through our Centre's website. This recognises that students will usually do their own searching.

What might the average student or researcher of Southeast Asian studies find?

The Web is a vast and rapidly growing agglomeration of mostly disorganised 'information'. Matthew Ciolek (1997; 1998b; 1998c) of the Australian National University has done considerable research on Asian studies and the Web. In late 1997, using the Alta Vista search engine, he found 3,247 English-language websites on a search of 'South East Asian Studies', of which only about 8 percent were considered useful. The remainder were described by Ciolek (1997) as either 'duplicates ... irrelevant ... personal pages ... [or] useless (=

devoid of factual information, stupid, misnamed, outrageous, bizarre, scatological or childish)’.

A similar search in late 2000 produced 516,000 web pages, and I would guess that the percentage of ‘useful’ sites might have been even less. The Web is growing remarkably rapidly.

This rapid growth of pages might not be a major problem as we would expect the student or researcher to search in rather more narrow terms. But then consider Ciolek’s (1998b) data where he shows a cumulative total of almost 2.4 million web pages when each country of Southeast Asia is searched, ranging from 21,000 sites for East Timor to 335,000 for Malaysia. The total number of pages increased by 76 percent in the 16 months of Ciolek’s study. I can add that the total for Thailand in late 2000 was 1,176,915 pages, an increase of almost 260 percent since 1998.

Even if the student is more specific, the results can still be overwhelming. In late 2000, I did some searching using terms I know that my students entered when seeking information for essays. The results are in the following table:

Topic	Search Engine	Hits/Pages
Thailand Politics	Google	275,000
Thailand Labour	Google	75,200
Thailand capitalism	Google	18,700
Thailand development	Google	541,000
Thailand environment	Google	352,000
Thailand gender	Google	106,000
Thailand women	Google	380,000
Thailand prostitution	Google	19,900

Thailand Buddhism	Google	32,400
Thailand Japan	Google	851,000
Malaysia Islam	Alta Vista	397,165
Malaysia Islam Women	Alta Vista	20,834
Thailand Internet	Google	665,000
Indonesia Internet	Google	610,000

Even if only five percent of these were useful sites, and the average student knew how to sort it, s/he still faces a massive and daunting task: how to evaluate this avalanche of information? In the library, this might seem easier. A keyword search of ‘Thailand Politics’ for all academic libraries in Hong Kong produced just 660 ‘hits’. That’s just books, but it is already a selective list – recommended by publishers and/or academics.

In teaching and in training students for research we demand ‘*Information literacy*’. Drawing from one of my course outlines, I explain to students that the

‘Social sciences emphasise abilities in research, analysis, interpretation and exposition. This necessarily involves an ability to find, access and understand a range of information sources. This course encourages student’s to access a wide range of information.’

But if the modern student is using the Web, how can they sift hundreds or even thousands of sites? Are we asking too much?

Maybe, but information overload is unlikely to be a problem easily solved, so we must assist students to develop some level of critical evaluation skills with the Web, just as we expect them to for other materials.

Critical Capacity

I cannot say that I have developed a way to assist students yet. Indeed, my brief forays into the area of evaluation of Web-based materials suggests considerable complexity. A number of universities have produced guidelines. Virginia Tech has a one page checklist that includes a useful on-line tutorial.² UCLA has a two-page guide to thinking critically about Web resources³, and the Maricopa Community Colleges have an evaluation sheet and related activities.⁴ And there are a number of non-university based checklists (e.g. Tyburski, 2000). Each of these requires considerable ability and knowledge on the part of the student. We cannot assume that the average student will be able to follow these guides, and nor that they will have the skills to complete assessments and evaluations. In fact, most students are using the Internet without being taught how to use it. It is now clear to me that students of Southeast Asian studies need to be taught the critical skills of how to research, publish and communicate using the Internet, as well as other sources of information (November, 1998).

It seems to me that the only way to overcome this problem is to insert seminars on critical thinking into the teaching programme. We have often done this with print-based materials, so there is no reason why we should not do the same with our students of Southeast Asian studies, especially as our classrooms allow us to connect to the Web.

One possibility might be to look at a range of sites for an essay and examine them critically in class, in small groups. Prostitution in Thailand might be one topic. The following table indicates some of the difficulties that students might be asked to assess.

Site 1 is an obvious private site, promoting some dubious values. The problem for students is that the site address appears reasonable. For example, the giveaway '~' is not included. The odd title, with words like '~~Problem~~' crossed through is a signal that students should take care. Most students would be likely to see that this site lacks authority. Item 2 is more easily seen as a personal site. In fact, though, this is a page of useful information, referenced to acceptable academic sources.

² <http://www.lib.vt.edu/research/libinst/evaluating.html>

³ <http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/instruct/web/critical.htm>

⁴ <http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/show/what/eval-act4.html>

Students may not see this as having authority as it is placed in an odd context. Here, students may need to cross-reference to other published resources and examine the references carefully. Item 3 has authority, being advice from the official Tourist Authority of Thailand. However, students may not note that it refers only to *child* prostitution, thus leaving unsaid the broader prostitution issue. Students may need to look at other sites and compare.

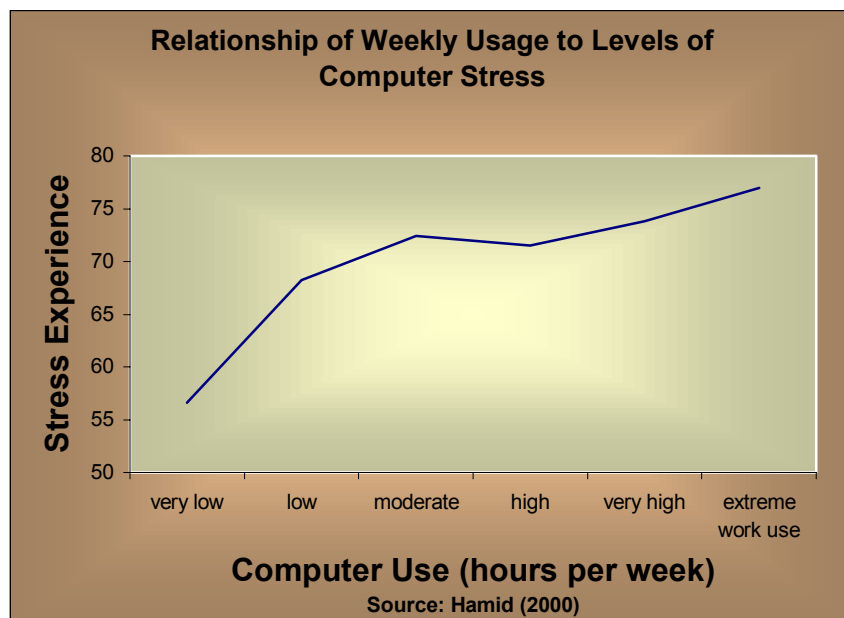
<p>1. Sexwork Cyber Center by Dave in Phoenix Promoting Intimacy and Other-Centered Sexuality The Child Prostitution Problem in Thailand</p>	<p>A private rant, presented fairly inexpertly.</p>
<p>http://www.sexwork.com/Thailand/child.html</p>	
<p>2. Prostitution in Thailand and Southeast Asia or How to keep millions of good women down from Selena Sol’s Digital Soul Page, incorporating ‘The Struggle’, an e-mag produced by Selena herself</p>	<p>Because this is a personal page, students may not see it as having authority as it is placed in an odd context.</p>
<p>http://www.fukada.com/selena/selena/struggle/thai_pros.html</p>	
<p>3. TAT Supports Fight Against Child Prostitution http://www.tat.or.th/visitor/index.htm</p>	<p>Advice from the Tourist Authority of Thailand on <i>child</i> prostitution. <i>But would students note that it leaves unsaid the broader issue of prostitution. How would they know that a recent TAT minister denied that prostitution was a problem in Pattaya, a town that is wall-to-wall sex industry.</i></p>

But to do this effectively, not only students but academics require support and training, not to mention technical assistance.

Stress

Let me comment on an interesting aspect of my life as an academic with 24 hour a day, seven days a week access to the Internet – I feel my life is more cluttered, more overloaded, and my workdays are longer. Maybe this is simply a ‘feeling’, but there are some worrying survey results regarding CityU students utilising computers. It is seen that there is a correlation between computer usage and ‘computer stress’ (Hamid, 2000). Obvious, perhaps, but it is also shown that about 20-30 percent of the stressors relate to human rather than technology issues.

We know that people become more confident with the Internet, the more they use it (Ciolek, 1998c), so we can expect that the stress experience will also increase. For our students, more computer stress will add to their general level of stress. For researchers and teachers the same is likely to hold true.



Use of Time

We might also question the time people are spending on the Internet, and how productive this is. One of our surveys indicates that CityU students already spend about 27 hours a week using computers, and much of this is using the Net (Hamid, 2000). We also note that men students spend about 12 hours more a week on the Net than women students.

The main reasons they give for using the computer include:

- Enthusiasm - enjoyment of computers and interested in how they work
- Entertainment - hobby and pastime, games
- Efficiency - accomplish goals, better documents, quicker output
- Communication - use of networks to keep in touch with others

Obviously not all of the use of computers is for academic pursuits, but four hours a day on the computer is a large part of each day. It is not entirely clear how 'efficient' this is.

It is obviously important that teachers and lecturers seek to assist students to become efficient users of these technologies.

Concluding Comments

Like much of the paper, my conclusions are elementary:

- We must accept that digital archives and sources will continue to expand for Southeast Asian studies.
- This will mean that researchers will be increasingly drawing on these resources.
- These researchers will also publish more of their findings in electronic format.
- Teachers must prepare their students to use digital resources on Southeast Asia effectively, critically and efficiently.
- Teachers also need to be better prepared for effectively integrating digital resources into their courses in ways that encourage critical thinking about such resources.

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