

Exploring new media usage among Indonesian students in Australian universities

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Abstract

Previous studies suggest that young people are the majority of internet users. Most research has focused on what people do on the internet, but has not considered how the use of internet relates to other aspects of their lives. This paper examines how the Indonesian students take up with the new media and use the internet in relation to their academic studies.

A mixed method approach is applied in this study, using questionnaires from a sample of 94 undergraduate and postgraduate students from diverse areas of Indonesia who have studied in Australian universities, followed by in-depth interviews with 10 selected participants. Preliminary findings are reported in this paper to provide a better understanding of how the differences in access and facilities in students' previous lives in Indonesia and their more recent circumstances in Australia contribute to their new media usage.

Key Words

New media, internet usage, internet access, learning activities, Indonesian students in Australia

Introduction

During the last decade new media particularly the internet has become a part of people's daily activities. The combination of interactive features of the new media and the internet offers easy and quick access for communication and the transfer of information around the world. Early studies of the new media tended to focus on effects of Information Communication Technology (ICT) on users, organizations and societies (Lievrouw & Livingstone 2006). Moreover, social researchers have investigated the impact of the internet as the number of internet users has grown extensively. Recent internet studies tend to examine the internet's social networks and their impacts on a range of disciplines (Wellman 2004). Many social scholars have also argued about the consequences of internet access, involvement and social interaction from both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives (Rice & Haythornthwaite 2006). However, the majority of researchers agree that the internet's effects are too heterogeneous to be captured by a simple model (Yamauchi & Coget 2002) which is similar to Rogers' conclusions twenty years ago when he observed that "the exact impacts of the new communication technologies depend upon the context in which they are used" (1986, p. 246).

Over the last few years a number of researchers have focused on the younger generation and its new media use. For instance, Maddel and Muncer (2005) indicate that young people use both the internet and mobile phones for complementary communication purposes, and they argue that the internet users' social networks are larger and more active than those of non-users because numerous search engines provide more social connectivity than content by providing email, chat rooms, e-groups, instant messaging, and personal spaces. Similarly, Jung et al. (2005) found that the most popular internet usage among youth was related to email, chatting, games, mailing list, newsgroups, or surfing web sites, maintaining a personal web, listening to or downloading music and reading online newspapers. Moreover, the Pew Internet and American Life Project concluded that American college students are early adopters and heavy internet users (2002) and of significance for the present study that the internet had also become an important tool of the learning environment for students both inside and outside of the classroom (Pew Internet 2001).

Recent information and communication technologies (ICTs) also potentially facilitate unique environments for academics and influence students' learning activities. Several researchers have observed many changes in the how the new media and the internet have played positive and negative roles in relation to opportunities and possibilities for student learning. For instance studies have been conducted into students' internet usage and the impact this has on academic dishonesty (Akbulut et al. 2007), distance education and library use (MacAuley 1997), English language learning (Chen 2007), the internet in learning ecology (Looi & Ang 2000; Looi 2001), wireless internet and student-centered learning (Lu et al. 2007), academics internet use (Applebee et al. 1997), as well as aspects of gender and cultural differences in internet use (Li & Kirkup 2007). Among those findings,

there is very little research focusing on the experiences of Indonesian students' new media and internet usage and their learning activities in overseas contexts.

In countries with a developed ICT infrastructure, access to these new media is expected and is promoted as an essential element to a country's social and economic success. In developed countries, academic communities have actively gained benefits of internet usage and other new media to support learning processes. In Australia, it is common that universities give free internet access to staff and students, so they have quick and easy access to online library catalogues, online journals and worldwide academic databases. But this is not the case in a developing country such as Indonesia, where internet users account for less than 9% of the population. In Australia on the other hand, that penetration is around 70% of the population (InternetWorldStats 2007). This contrasting situation between the two countries in terms of new media, internet access and usage drew my interest in exploring changes in Indonesian students' academic lives as a result of living and studying in Australia where they are expected to not only have access to the new media and the internet, they must also become highly skilled users if they are to be successful in their academic careers.

The study

This research study drew on both quantitative and qualitative methods. In the first phase the researcher created a questionnaire to collect the students' demographic details, comparison of their new media products before coming to and while they studied in Australia, their internet access and their reported usage. The second phase was a qualitative study using in-depth interviews to explore previous and recent experiences of internet usage particularly as these related to participants' learning activities, as well as their plans after returning to Indonesia. Data were collected during June to September 2007 and was analysed using SPSS for the questionnaires and NVivo for in-depth interviews.

This project involved 94 Indonesian students in Victorian-based universities who agreed to participate. The number of participants who were almost equally divided between males (51%) and females (49%) with their ages ranging from 17 to 48 years old with a median age of 27 years. Two thirds (67%) of the participants were Masters and PhD students, while the others were undergraduates in various disciplines studying at Monash University, University of Melbourne, Victoria University, RMIT, Deakin University and Swinburne University. Around fifty percent of participants were scholarship recipients, other 37% funded by family, only few numbers were self funded and work sponsored. Their length of stay in Australia varied from 6 months to 7 years. Almost three fourths stayed in Australia between 6 months to 2 years and the remained more than 2 years. Before coming to Australia, majority student participants resided in the middle of cities and suburbs in different areas of Indonesia covering almost all of the big islands such as Java, Sumatera, Sulawesi, Bali, Kalimantan and Papua.

A majority of the student participants (79%) have used the internet for the past 6-8 years. Interestingly, fifty percent of the participants considered themselves to be *advanced internet users*, forty five percent rated themselves as *average users*, and only 3% considered themselves as a *beginner* with one person proposing herself as an *expert*.

Preliminary findings

This study found that almost all participants had television and mobile phones both in Indonesia and Australia. Around ninety percent had radio and telephone in Indonesia but the number slightly decreased when they were studying in Australia. Interestingly, there was a lower number of desktop computer owners in Australia than in Indonesia, but this was more than compensated for by the higher number of laptop owners during their time in Australia. The number of participants who had internet link or modem, digital camera, iPod and PDA increased during the time they were living in Australia, but ownership of video recorders, TV-linked games, cable TV and games declined.

More than thirty percent of participants bought a laptop and or a mobile phone within the last six months and twenty five percent purchased an internet link or modem. Laptop and mobile phone were two popular new media devices among Indonesian students in this study, although more than fifteen percent also purchased a telephone, iPod, and TV, while around ten percent had a new digital camera, personal stereo, radio and PDA. These changes reflect the greater mobility of participants while they are living in Australia. Additionally, about fifteen percent planned to purchase a handycam and digital camera, while approximately ten percent wanted to buy mobile phone, laptop and iPod.

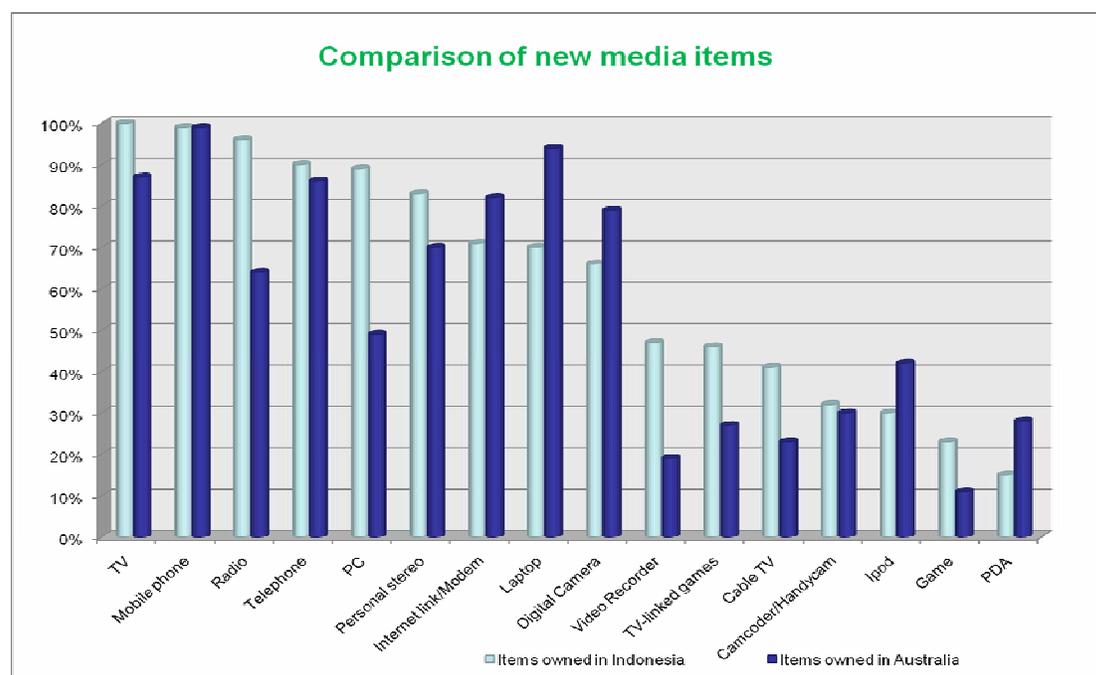


Figure 1. Comparison of new media items owned by Indonesian students before coming to and while studying in Australian universities

While in Indonesia, three fourths of the participants (74.5%) did not have any internet training, just twenty percent had one or two training sessions. Based on the interviews, some student participants said that they first knew about the internet from friends or family members and learnt how to operate the internet from them without attending any formal courses. As one participant observed:

“Actually I learnt the internet not because doing thesis but because my friend used email and I wanted to have my own email. Then he taught me how to open an email and I thought it was fantastic. Yeah, I use the internet at the first time for email although it was not regularly. Then when I did my thesis I used the internet more.” (AV, postgraduate student)

Regarding their access to the internet, prior to coming to Australia a third of the Indonesian students in the study reported that they mostly accessed the internet from an internet kiosk; a further 31% gained access from home, and 27% were able to secure access from their work place. This finding is similar to previous research which has shown that around half of the internet users in Indonesia have access from internet kiosks (International Telecommunication Union, 2002). Quantitative data showed that 42% of participants spent less than Rp 100,000 per month on internet access in Indonesia, 31% reported paid between Rp 100,000 - 200,000, and 21% spent more than Rp 200,000. One interviewee claimed that generally the cost of having access at an internet kiosk was affordable which varied from Rp 3,000 to 5,000 per hour or approximately 50-70 cents in Australian dollar.

“I think it’s quite affordable. In my home town, Yogyakarta, most kiosks charge about three to five thousand rupiah for one hour access and sometimes they offer ‘happy hours’ for using the internet after midnight until morning, so the cost would be very cheap...children or teenager, even junior high school or elementary students often go to internet café just to have a game online.” (RH, postgraduate student)

While these participants were studying in Australia, their most popular place of access was home (71%), followed by on campus (22%). Among those who had home internet access in Australia, 85% of them chose broadband. This was not surprising because the majority of people in Australia use the internet at home via a broadband connection (ABS 2007). During their stay in Australia, 54% of the Indonesian students in this study spent less than \$40 on their access connection, while 34% paid \$41-\$80 per month for their access. Additionally, there were a few participants who did not know their internet expenditure because it was included in their housing rent costs.

Although previous studies claim that college students are early adopters and heavy users of the internet compared to the general population (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2002; Forgas & Negre 2004), it is difficult to know whether this is similar for Indonesian students and the general population because no national

statistics are available. However, this study has found that 38% of the student participants use the internet for academic purposes such as finding and reading online journals or book chapters for between 3-5 hours during a typical weekday. Just over a third of the sample (33%) spent between 1-3 hours for the same purposes. During a typical weekend the time spent using the internet for academic purposes slightly declined: 20% for between 3-5 hours, around 31% for 1-3 hours, and 20% for somewhere between 30 minutes and 1 hour.

Conversely, during a typical weekend, the use for non-academic purposes increased. These non-academic activities included sending or reading emails from friends or family, chatting, looking for products or service information, buying goods and services online, banking, reading news, looking at other peoples' websites, creating or maintaining blogs, as well as downloading software, music, film or images.

When they were asked about how often they visited certain websites during two weeks, around one third of participants checked their own university websites more than 40 times but more than half (55%) didn't look at other university websites at all.

Regarding library visit to get academic journals, articles or any databases related study, almost one third of participants did so more than 40 times, 21% between 11-20 times and 18% visited somewhere between 21-30 times over a two week period. Using search engines such as *Google*, *Yahoo*, *Ask.com* or *AltaVista* was popular among students in this study. Almost forty percent of them used it more than 40 times, twenty percent used it 11-20 times and the others varied from 6 to 40 times during two weeks.

How about visiting computer games and cheats? Sixty three percent reported that they didn't visit games' websites at all. Looking at mobile phone sites was not a popular online activity either. Almost eighty percent of participants said that they didn't visit this kind of websites.

In educational environment, learner-instructor interaction is an opportunity to change information or ideas in order to motivate and support the learner (Hill et al. 2007). These communications might be facilitated by joining online discussion groups and sending emails to lecturers. However, this research found that nearly 61% of participants sent emails to lecturers or tutors only once to five times during a two week period and 15% did not email them at all. One student interviewee admitted that sometimes she didn't feel it necessary to send email to lecturer because she had no question about the lecture, she said:

"Well, I think I prefer to look for information from my friends or to discuss my questions with my friends first before asking to lecturer via email. Also I often find everything is clear in the lecture because we can discuss anything in class." (SI, postgraduate student)

While another student said that she preferred face to face communication rather than via email:

"I feel it's not comfortable because I have to edit my words..." (AD, postgraduate student)

When the participants were asked about what was the most useful item to get information to support their study, 50% preferred the internet, 25% chose lecturers or tutors, while 21% sought information in books, and others placed their trust in advice from friends. Some interviewees said that they used both the internet and books complementary. A postgraduate student who was studying for a Master of Arts indicated that:

"The latest information related to my study is available through the internet. But in my field, we still using like, for example a book of interview, which is published long, long time ago and it's not provided by the internet. So that kind of information which contains theoretical issues and could involve us more deeply into discussion... then we refer to that book. We still use books. When I look into the (online) university catalogue I always search book first." (RH, postgraduate student)

In summary

This paper has examined how Indonesian students in Victorian-based universities have taken up with the new media and use the internet in relation to their study. Based on quantitative and qualitative findings, the project suggests that the internet has become an important source of information which students use to support their learning processes. The convenience of the internet has changed the way students search out resources. This research would suggest that books and lecturers are no longer seen as the main source of information for study and learning.

This study also confirms that the new communication technologies have influenced learning processes but that the impacts are complicated depending on the users and their usage patterns. Perhaps it is difficult to agree with Hemenway's argument that "the internet is a dynamic, broad-based, relatively inexpensive tool of communication and information gathering" (2000, p.119). Although it may be true in certain circumstances, it is hard to apply it in the Indonesian context where the infrastructure does not yet provide for quick access to the

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internet and to the new media technologies. Around 85% of participants in this study confirmed that they had difficulties securing internet access in Indonesia. Even when access was possible there are problems related to connection, download speed and capability. However, all interviewees agreed that the internet has become a basic need in their daily activities while studying in Australia. Furthermore, they have expressed their desire to maintain their access after returning to Indonesia and will encourage others to take advantage of the internet as a means of learning and educational development.

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