Establishing the basic knowledge required for local English newspaper article study in academic research projects (NASARP): the Hong Kong case

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Abstract:

    *In academic research projects, studying and making reference to newspaper articles are very often done to support the literature review, research design and findings analysis, and recommendations formulation. Nevertheless, the Business and Social Research literature has not been helpful to pull together ideas from Journalism, Online Information Services and Discourse Analysis, among others, to provide a more consolidated and whole-project way to inform **newspaper article study in academic research projects** (NASARP). This paper redresses this largely neglected topic by explaining how certain basic knowledge is required for NASARP. It mainly focuses on local English newspaper article study through newspaper websites in Hong Kong for university students' dissertation reports are mainly written in English and online access is more exhaustive and efficient than examination of archived printed newspapers. The discussion is also informed by a Facebook-based questionnaire related to NASARP. As a whole, it offers pedagogical value to students and teachers as well as academic value to the field of academic research in social science.*

Key words: A whole-project perspective; Academic research projects; Discourse analysis; Journalism; Newspaper article study in academic research projects (NASARP); Online information services; Search engines in newspaper websites

Introduction

Both in this writer's own research works, e.g., Ho (2014a; 2015a) and his students' final year dissertation projects, local (Hong Kong) English newspapers have often been relied on by this writer and his students for literature review as well as for secondary source document study (Wikipedia, 2015a). For this discussion, local English newspapers are emphasized because all the published works from this writer as well as the students' dissertation reports from these university students have to be written in English for publication and university assessment requirements. Nevertheless, the existing literature on research methods, e.g., textbooks on business/ social research and academic articles has very few works that specifically examine newspaper article study in academic research projects (NASARP) with a whole-project perspective[1]. This unsatisfactory situation motivates the writer to study the topic from a whole-project standpoint. A Facebook-based questionnaire survey has also been carried out to gather some empirical data on perceptions on this topic in order to enrich this intellectual exercise.

Ideas for NASARP from the subjects of Journalism, Online Information Services and Discourse Analysis

Newspaper article study is undoubtedly within the broad scope of literature review for the term literature is "all sources of published data on a particular topic" (Collis and Hussey, 2009). In turn, a literature review involves a critical evaluation of the literature so as to inform a research project (Ho, 2015b). Besides, newspaper article study has been employed to support

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[1] A *whole-project perspective* means a full coverage of all content components of a generic academic research project, i.e., (i) Introduction on the academic project, (ii) Literature review, (iii) Research design, (iv) Findings and analysis and (v) Conclusions and recommendations.

other investigation efforts in an academic research project, e.g., content analysis and recommendations formulation. Nevertheless, none of the major textbooks on Business and Social Research, e.g., Saunders *et al.* (2012), Gill *et al.* (2010), Collis and Hussey (2009) and Bryman and Bell (2007), spares a separate chapter to more closely explain the newspaper article study in academic projects with a whole-project perspective. Similarly, academic articles on this topic are also rare. On the other side, there is a huge literature on Journalism, Online Information Services and Discourse Analysis, with ideas definitely able to offer inspirations for NASARP with a whole-project perspective. It is thus useful to highlight some of these ideas to constitute certain basic knowledge for NASARP. (Obviously, knowledge of Research Methods is also required for NASAPR.) This is done here.

To start with, **Journalism** is about gathering, processing, and dissemination of news and related information to readers (Wikipedia, 2015b). Relevant academic journal are *Journalism* (Sage Publications) and *New media & society* (Sage Publications). Specifically, the literature on journalism tells us the following things that are related to NASARP, among others:

Journalism idea 1 (J1): "Fewer and fewer Americans are bothering with newspapers… The papers are not merely unreadable, they are substantially unread" (Engel, 2003).

Journalism idea 2 (J2): "Social media has been increasingly used to gather and share news stories from mainstream news web sites…" (Ma *et al.*, 2014).

Journalism idea 3 (J3): "Despite this self-censorship, however, Hong Kong's media in the year following the takeover, for the most part, has functioned relatively freely. In part this is due to newspeople who are dedicated to their profession…" (Hutcheon, 1998).

Journalism idea 4 (J4): "The year under review has been the darkest for press freedom for several decades, with the media coming under relentless assault from several directions.

There have been attacks on journalists, sacking and personal changes affecting critical personalities and the withdrawal of advertising, which places pressure on the editorial integrity of publications...." (Bale *et al*., 2014). [Note: The statements are about Hong Kong.] This expressed worry on self-censorship and threats to press freedom are dismissed by van der Kamp (2015) on the other hand.

The second source of ideas comes from the literature of **Online Information Services** (OIS) (Beal, 2015), which also includes evaluation of search engines (Zuze and Weideman, 2013; Zhang *et al*., 2013). Relevant academic journal are *Online Information Review* (Emerald) and *VINE* (Emerald). Examples of useful ideas are as follows:

OIS idea 1 (O1): "Every time when there is a new communication technology evolved, news readers adopt the new technology and utilize its new functionalities to satisfy their needs. News reading habit also changes accordingly..." (Ma *et al*., 2015).

OIS idea 2 (O2): "... "electronic information resources have characteristics of both information sources and information technology", and that "use of electronic information resources can be explained by a combination of actors which included information use studies and technology use studies"..." (Alison and Dixon, 2004).

The third source of inspiration comes from the literature of **Discourse Analysis** (DA)[2]. The subject of Discourse Analysis (DA) covers "a number of approaches to analyze written, vocal, or sign language use, or any significant semiotic event" (Wikipedia, 2015c). Relevant academic journals include *Discourse & Society* (Sage), *Discourse Studies* (Sage) and *Discourse, Context and Media* (Elsevier). Some useful ideas relevant for NASARP are:

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[2] For Schneider (2013), discourse is "communication practices, which systematically construct our knowledge of reality". It is carried out in a variety of modes and media (Schneider, 2013).

DA idea 1 (D1): "…certain people and social groups create and formulate ideas about our world, which under certain conditions turn into unquestioned truths and start to seem normal" (Schneider, 2013).

DA idea 2 (D2): "…discourse is the expression of human thought, and consequently has its roots in the interaction between our minds and our physical and social environments" (Schneider, 2013).

DA idea 3 (D3): "…discourse affects social relations through the very real, often physical effects it has on our environment.." (Schneider, 2013).

The ideas selected from the three subjects are illustrative, not exhaustive. While this writer and most of the university students doing NASARP are not experts in these three subjects, this writer maintains that the ideas from these subjects constitute the basic knowledge required for NASARP, e.g., in terms of how to access and judge the quality and relevance of information from newspapers for academic research purpose. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail on discourse analysis or content analysis with newspaper articles for academic research purpose.

Academic research project content components and the relevance of NASARP

When considering all the dissertation project contents with a whole-project perspective, NASARP is relevant to the individual project content components in the following specific way as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Generic academic research project content components based on a whole-project perspective and the relevance of newspaper article study

Generic academic research project content components	*Relevance of newspaper article study*
Component 1: Introduction on the	Help generating and refining research

academic project	topics with practical value.
Component 2: Literature review	Provide knowledge, viewpoints and illustrative examples in literature review.
Component 3: Research design	Provide secondary data for content analysis[3] and discourse analysis.
Component 4: Findings and analysis	Subject newspaper articles to content analysis and discourse analysis. Provide illustrative examples to support reasoning in analysis of findings.
Component 5: Conclusions and recommendations	Provide illustrative examples and a variety of viewpoints from different stakeholders to inform formulation of recommendations. Provide illustrative examples and a variety of viewpoints to inform formulation of concluding statements.

Essentially, Table 1 shows that NASARP can be valuable to research works spanning all the academic research project content components. Considering all these components is what a whole-project perspective is all about. Another crucial NASARP question is how to make use of the search engine of local newspaper websites to search for relevant archived newspaper articles, which is a typical topic in OIS. This is examined in the next section.

Use of local (Hong Kong) English newspaper websites for NASARP

In Hong Kong, there are only two established local English newspapers, i.e., *South China Morning Post* and *The Standard*. [Note: Primarily, *China Daily* is not a local newspaper in Hong Kong.] Both have printed and online versions. While *The Standard* offers free access online, *South Morning Post* online content is subscription-based. Probably, readers' news consumption patterns of online and printed versions differ ((D'Haenens *et al.*, 2004); this should be borne in mind as the

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[3] See, for example, Schafraad *et al.* (2006) as an illustration.

discussion here is on the online versions of the local newspapers. In this paper, the writer mainly reviews the online versions of the two local newspapers because searching for archived newspaper articles for research purpose with the printed versions of newspaper is, without comprehensive indexing, cumbersome. Besides, newspapers' paper quality deteriorates over time quickly. Thus maintaining an archive of printed newspapers is quite infeasible for most researchers and students. Online search via newspaper website search engines, in comparison, is much more exhaustive and efficient.

For *South China Morning Post*, news are categorized into: (i) news (daily news), (ii) business news, (iii) tech news, (iv) lifestyle, (v) comment, (vi) sport, (vii) property, (viii) video and, finally, (ix) magazines. There is a search engine function in the online newspaper website. As to *The Standard*, news are grouped into: (i) breaking news, (ii) editorials, (iii) top news, (iv) local, (v) business, (vi) China, (vii) world, (viii) focus/ viewpoint, (ix) citytalk, (x) sports, (xi) people, (xii) central station, (xiii) weekend glitz, and, finally, (xiv) money glitz. Overall, both have a broad coverage of news content. Regarding NASRM, the most important feature to evaluate is the newspaper website search engine, which enables researchers to access archived newspaper articles relevant to their research interest, e.g., to support their literature search and review efforts. To evaluate the performance of the search engines of *South China Morning Post* and *The Standard*, the writer sets up three simple tests. Test 1 is a search for relevant newspaper articles on "parallel trading" via the newspapers' search engines and Test 2 is on "housing affordability". Finally, Test 3 considers "employee empowerment". The three terms used in the tests are concepts from Business Management and Housing Studies. The steps of the tests are to type the key words into the search engines and count the number of articles found by them. The three tests were carried out on May 6, 2015. The results are summarized in Table 2 as follows:

Table 2: Test results on the search engine performance of *South China Morning Post* and *The Standard*

Search results of South China Moring Post	Search results of The Standard
No. of newspaper articles found for "parallel trading": 851[4]	No. of newspaper articles found for "parallel trading": 1 (for 2015 within 1 week); 2 (for 2014) (also see Appendix 2)
No. of newspaper articles found for "housing affordability": 5584[5]	No. of newspaper articles found for "housing affordability": 0 (for 2015 within 1 week); 0 (for 2014)
No. of newspaper articles found for "employee empowerment": 64[6]	No. of newspaper articles found for "employee empowerment": 0 (for 2015 within 1 week); 0 (for 2014)

The three tests clearly indicate that in terms of content and power of website search engine, *South China Morning* is far superior to *The Standard*. Besides, using *The Standard* search engine requires more keystrokes and has more restrictions, thus much less usable[7] in comparison to that of *South China Morning Post*. Without doubt, the search engine of *South China Morning* website is the preferred choice for doing online NASARP, while that of *The Standard* has very limited value for this purpose.

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[4] Search results are further grouped into Parallel Trading, Business, Hong Kong, Entertainment, Baby Milk Powder, Sheung Shui, Mainland Visitors, Pearl River Delta, Politics, China, Leung Chun-ying, Infant milk formula, Shenzhen, Chinese tourists, Focus, Infant Formula, Milk formula, MTR, Natural Disaster, Geography, etc.. See Appendix 1.

[5] Search results are further grouped into Hong Kong, Business, Social Issues, Politics, Pearl River Delta, Affordable Housing, Real Estate, Entertainment, Acquisition, Natural Disaster, Donald Tsang, Beijing, Environment, Politics of Hong Kong, Home Ownership Scheme, China, etc..

[6] Search results are further grouped into Business, Hong Kong, Management, Social issues, Company employee number, Human resource management, Entertainment, Finance, Pfizer, Professional Accountant, Sociology, Strategic management, Acquisition, Aging, Airline, Asia, etc..

[7] For a discussion of the *usability* concept, please refer to Ho (2015c).

An interpretation of Facebook-based questionnaire survey findings related to NASARP

A Facebook-based questionnaire survey was conducted with the writer's Facebook friends from May 1 to May 4, 2015 to learn people's NASARP practices and their perception of NASARP's value (re: Appendix 3 and 4). To improve response rate, Facebook messages were sent out to the writer's Facebook friends as invitation to participate in the survey. The survey questions are provided in Appendix 3. The strengths and weaknesses of Facebook-based questionnaire survey have been examined by Ho (2014b), thus not repeated here. The writer's Facebook has 1,573 friends and 99 friends have responded to the survey. Among them, 50 of them are male and 49 female. Referring to Appendix 3, the majority of the respondents (74 respondents) are within the age range of 28 to 47. The main survey findings are provided as follows:

I.   Basic findings

Finding 1 (re: question 5): 79 respondents (80.6%) rely on newspapers to learn local news either as a prime source or partially. This figure indicates that local newspapers remain a vital source to consume local news, which is different from the idea of J1. In addition, some of the newspaper news are also shared via the social media, such as Facebook (re: J2). At the same time, respondents should pay attention to the ideas of D1, J3 and J4 so as to reduce the risk of being misled by reading newspaper news.

        Finding 2 (re: questions 6 and 7): 40 respondents (40.8%) make much or some use of local English newspapers to do assignments during their formal education study while 43 respondents (43.9%) do the same for their dissertation reports in that period of time. The two figures indicate that local English newspapers are an important literature source for doing   assignments   and   dissertation   projects.   Again,

respondents should be aware of the risk of being misled by relying on newspaper news as reminded by the concerns of J3, J4 and D1.

Finding 3 (re: questions 8 and 9): 62 respondents (62.8%) either strongly or mildly feel that local English newspapers have a serious self-censorship problem and 69 respondents (70.4%) either strongly or mildly feel that the self-censorship problem of local newspapers will get much worse in two years' time. These figures are quite in consonance with ideas J3 and J4.

Finding 4 (re: questions 10 and 11): 65 respondents (67%) either strongly or mildly feel that the self-censorship problem of local English newspapers significantly reduces their reliance on them as a major source of learning local news while 62 (63.3%) either strongly or mildly feel that this problem of local English newspapers reduces their value as an academic research tool. These figures indicate how the perceived concerns of J3 and J4 can affect NASARP. They also lend support to the recommended requirement to gain basic knowledge in Journalism, Online Information Services and Discourse Analysis for NASARP.

Finding 5 (re: questions 12 and 13): 53 respondents (53.4%) either strongly or mildly feel that the search engine of *South China Morning Post* is a useful tool for conducting academic research; the corresponding figure for *The Standard* is 50 respondents (50.5%). This topic of search engine performance evaluation belongs to the subject of OIS. Based on the writer's tests on the two search engines, the one from *The Standard* is much inferior to that of *South China Morning Post*. This suggests that many of the respondents are actually not familiar with the search engine performance of the two newspaper websites – their perception is quite uninformed. In the meantime, the improved functionality and accessibility of online newspaper websites and the sharing of newspaper news in social media can influence people's reading habit and

promote their preference for doing online NASARP. Such a view is compatible with the idea of O1.

   Finding 6 (re: questions 14 and 15): 54 respondents (54.5%) either strongly or mildly feel that they will rely less on local English newspapers (both online or printed versions) to learn local news in two years' time; the corresponding figure for local Chinese newspapers is 65 respondents (65.7%). These figures are in line with the concerns of J1, J3 and J4, but also suggest that the problem is conceived to be more severe with the local Chinese newspapers.

II.   Additional findings via further querying with Excel-data-filtering function

Finding 7 (re: questions 4 and 7): This analysis is intended to show whether a respondent's discipline major affects his/her reliance on local English newspapers for doing his/her dissertation project. The finding is manifested in Table 3 below. The table figures[8] indicate that *Accounting and Finance* and *Business Management* students rely more on online local English newspapers for doing dissertation projects than students major in other disciplines.

Table 3

Discipline major in	Rely a lot	Rely mildly	Basically not
Accounting and Finance	2 (5%)	20 (51%)	17 (44%)
Business Management	2 (8%)	11 (46%)	11 (46%)
IT/ Computer Science	2 (12%)	2 (12%)	13 (76%)
Housing Studies	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	3 (75%)
Others	1 (13%)	2 (25%)	5 (63%)

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[8] The figures in the table cells are numbers of response on the respective options, while those in brackets are the percentage figures of the corresponding row subtotals. For example, regarding the % figure in the top left-hand cell, which is 5%, the calculation is 2/(2+20+17).

Finding 8 (re: questions 8 and 11): This analysis is intended to reveal whether feeling on the self-censorship problem with local English newspapers affects perception on the value of these newspapers (both printed and online versions) as an academic research tool. The finding is shown in Table 4. The figures indicate that there is some positive correlation between the feelings on question 8 (about self-censorship problem) and question 11 (about value of these newspapers as an academic research tool); besides, quite some respondents who have a mild feeling on question 8 also hold a strong feeling on question 11. This finding sheds more light on survey finding 2 and 4 above.

Table 4

Feeling on the self-censorship problem with local English newspapers	Strong feeling	Mild feeling	Not feel this way	No idea
Strong feeling	16 (73%)	3 (14%)	1 (5%)	2 (9%)
Mild feeling	20 (51%)	14 (36%)	4 (10%)	1 (3%)
Not feel this way	1 (8%)	2 (15%)	10 (77%)	0 (0%)
No idea	0 (0%)	6 (25%)	4 (17%)	14 (58%)

Finding 9 (re: questions 7 and 12): This analysis tries to find out whether usage of online local English newspapers for doing dissertation projects affects a respondent's feeling of *South China Morning Post*'s search engine as a useful academic research tool. The finding is shown in Table 5. The figures in the table indicate that experience of usage with *South China Morning Post*'s search engine does positively affect feeling of its usefulness as an academic research tool. Nevertheless, even for those who do not/did not rely on it for doing dissertation projects, there are a significant number of respondents who strongly or mildly feel that the search engine is a useful

academic research tool. This provides additional information to the topic of search engine in OIS study.

Table 5

Usage of South China Morning Post in dissertation projects	Strong feeling	Mild feeling	Not feel this way	No idea
Rely a lot.	5 (63%)	3 (38%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Rely mildly	7 (20%)	21 (60%)	3 (9%)	4 (11%)
Do not rely	2 (4%)	14 (29%)	15 (31%)	18 (37%)

Overall, the nine survey findings reveal that NASARP with online English newspaper websites is not pervasive but still important. Other than that, the experience of newspaper article study does affect the respondents' perception of the online English newspapers' search engines as a useful academic research tool. The majority of the respondents also share the concern of newspaper self-censorship locally, which they feel reduces the value of these online facilities as an academic research tool. The findings from the survey are able to be interpreted more fruitfully when related to the ideas from the literature reviewed on the three subjects of Journalism, Online Information Services and Discourse Analysis in this paper. Such findings also underline the importance of having basic knowledge of these three subjects for doing well in NASARP.

Concluding remarks

With online newspaper websites, researchers and students doing academic research projects should find NASARP more convenient and useful. At the same time, there are useful ideas from a number of disciplines that make up the required basic knowledge for NASARP. By highlighting some of these ideas and using them to interpret a Facebook-based questionnaire

survey on NASARP, the paper illuminates the fundamental value of these ideas for NASARP based on a whole-project perspective. Lastly, as the discussion primarily focuses on NASARP with the online version of English newspapers in the Hong Kong context, more research works can be conducted on this topic in other contexts, so as to make further theoretical development on this topic in Research Methods.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Search result on "parallel trading" in *South China Morning Post***'s website.**

Appendix 2: Search result on "parallel trading" in *The Standard's* **website.**

Appendix 3: The Facebook-based survey questions (15 questions) and responses statistics.

Survey questions	Survey statistics
Question 1: What is your gender?	Male: 50 (50.5%)
	Female: 49 (49.5%)
Question 2: What is your age?	18 to 27: 11 (11.1%)
	28 to 37: 43 (43.4%)
	38 to 47: 31 (31.3%)

	48 to 57: 14 (14.1%) 58 to 67: 0 (0%) 68 or above: 0 (0%)
Question 3: What is your education background?	Not yet a degree-holder: 27 (27.3%) Finished University Undergraduate Degree study: 55 (55.6%) Finished Master Degree study: 17 (17.2%) Finished Ph.D. Degree study (or equivalent): 0 (0%)
Question 4: What discipline are you primarily major in in your formal education?	Accounting and Finance: 44 (44.4%) Business Management: 24 (24.2%) IT/ Computer Science: 18 (18.2%) Housing Studies: 4 (4.0%) Other discipline(s): 8 (8.1%) It is complicated: 1 (1.0%)
Question 5: Do you rely on newspapers (e.g., printed and online versions; English and Chinese) to learn local news?	Yes, it is a prime source: 43 (43.9%) Yes, I partially rely on them: 36 (36.7%) Yes, as an insignificant source: 8 (8.2%) Not at all: 11 (11.2%)
Question 6: Do/did you make much use of the online versions of local English newspapers, i.e., *South China Morning Post* and *The Standard*, to do your assignments during your formal education study?	Yes, I rely a lot on them: 10 (10.2%) Yes, I mildly rely on them: 30 (30.6%) No, basically I do not rely on them: 54 (55.1%) Not applicable: 4 (4.1%)
Question 7: Do/did you make much use of the online versions of local English newspapers, i.e., *South China Morning Post* and *The Standard*, to do your dissertation project during your formal education study?	Yes, I rely a lot on them: 8 (8.2%) Yes, I mildly rely on them: 35 (35.7%) No, basically I do not rely on them: 49 (50.0%) Not applicable: 6 (6.1%)
Question 8: Do you feel that local (Hong Kong) English newspapers have a serious self-censorship problem?	Yes, I strongly feel this way: 22 (22.2%) I mildly fee this way: 40 (40.4%) I do not feel this way: 13 (13.1%) No idea: 24 (24.2%)
Question 9: Do you feel that the self-censorship problem of local (Hong Kong) newspapers (both English and Chinese ones will get worse in 2 years' time?	Yes, I strongly feel so: 40 (40.8%) I have this feeling mildly: 29 (29.6%) I don't feel this way: 11 (11.2%) No idea: 18 (18.4%)
Question 10: Do you feel that the self-censorship problem of local (Hong Kong) English newspapers significantly reduces your reliance on them as a major source of	Yes, I strongly feel this way: 29 (29.9%) I mildly feel this way: 36 (37.1%) I do not feel this way: 17 (17.5%) No idea: 15 (15.5%)

learning local news?	
Question 11: Do you feel that the self-censorship problem of local (Hong Kong) newspapers significantly reduces their value as an academic research tool?	Yes, I strongly feel this way: 37 (37.8%) I mildly feel this way: 25 (25.5%) I do not feel this way: 19 (19.4%) No idea: 17 (17.3%)
Question 12: Do you feel that the search engine of *South China Morning Post* is a useful tool for conducting academic research?	Yes, I strongly feel this way: 14 (14.1%) I mildly feel this way: 39 (39.4%) I do not feel this way: 18 (18.2%) No idea: 28 (28.3%)
Question 13: Do you feel that the search engine of *The Standard* is a useful tool for conducting academic research?	Yes, I strongly feel this way: 11 (11.1%) I mildly feel this way: 39 (39.4%) I do not feel this way: 21 (21.2%) No idea: 28 (28.3%)
Question 14: Do you feel that you will rely much less on the local English newspapers (both online and printed versions) to learn local news in 2 years' time?	Yes, I strongly feel so: 20 (20.2%) I feel so mildly: 34 (34.3%) I do not feel this way: 26 (26.3%) No idea: 19 (19.2%)
Question 15: Do you feel that you will rely much less on the local Chinese newspapers (both online and printed versions) to learn local news in 2 years' time?	Yes, I strongly feel so: 27 (27.3%) I feel so mildly: 38 (38.4%) I do not feel this way: 24 (24.2%) No idea: 10 (10.1%)

Appendix 4: Response statistics over time, from May 1 to 4, 2015.