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Nothing like a good dose of reading the mainstream media

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NEW Straits Times honoured last Wednesday's World Press Freedom Day by publishing a thoughtful article in the leader's page entitled "The best medium wins the readers".

Malaysiakini.com celebrated the occasion with a gloomy, distressing piece Eulogy for Press Freedom by Steven Gan.

A few days earlier, the website carried a poison letter by a "businessman" who savaged the local Press, mercilessly labelling "some Malaysian journalists" as "programmed mouthpieces of xenophobic politicians".

The "businessman" barked: "Serious and honest businessmen" (like him?) depend much more on the foreign media for more accurate information and analyses.

A soul mate who works in the media and who feels she is being unfairly crucified regarded the attack as "crass".

"These 'I-only-read-the-foreign-media' people are being economical with the truth. Don't tell me they want to be deprived of the Umno Assembly and Thomas Cup stories this week," she argued, adding that she could feel a rush of nationalistic fervour ahead of the Thomas Cup.

Let's not go off tangent. The foreign media can never replace the local newspapers whose biggest threat will be the electronic media. And one mustn't jump to conclusions.

Admittedly some of the flippant and harsh words that permeate cyberspace rival those angry pronouncements that China devotes to Taiwan.

Much will depend on the tolerance and patience level of the esteemed readers.

The question is whether they will give the news sites the time and compassion needed to evolve as they jostle and cry out loud for precious attention.

In stimulating debate, however, the mainstream media is better equipped and has a wealth of talent.

When readers are spoilt for choice, media analysts are united in arguing that much thought and soul-searching have to be put into the work every step of the way. The essence is quality, quality and more quality.

Editors have long awakened to the new realities, and are right now combing the terrain for journalists. The best and the savviest, those willing to persevere the rigours, and are able to write quick analyses and interpret events without inviting legal suits, no longer come cheap.

The media knows vividly that in an intense competition, the intellectual, research-based, resource-rich route is the safest bet. Media organisations are thus busy linking up and combining their resources.

You see Far Eastern Economic Review and Asian Wall Street Journal slots in CNBC and a CNN-time production because nothing can be taken for granted anymore.

One can chastise, cajole, prod, lecture, preach, and browbeat, but the readers and viewers will be both prosecutor and judge. They may well be unforgiving to blinkered and jaundiced views. Experience will be a factor.

The world over, the old media is wary at satirical, tongue-in-cheek pieces now clogging the Malaysian-based news sites. Such writings while being exciting to the writers can fall flat on their faces if the readers don't get the joke you are attempting.

My own hunch is when the swirling dust settles, the old media-

newspapers, radio and television will come out tops, provided that they adapt and adjust.

And it has the Internet revolution to thank for this prospective upswing.

The more a person is wired up, the greater will be his appetite and zest for information and knowledge.

You have all gone through the phase in your life when you begin to devour anything that wafts your way.

International news magazines update their websites daily but that is a sales pitch for the main product - the magazines. You hear a news flash somewhere, and you will scurry to a newsstand to read the fuller account.

You tune in to the radio (which is why the news and current issues component in the radio must be revolutionised) or switch on the television sets.

The Malaysian news sites are sadly, politically coloured or slanted to become a reliable source for news and analyses.

Malaysiakini had lots of potential until the convictions of people behind it appeared or dictated its news and commentaries. Malaysiakini blew up a chance to crow about its comprehensive interview with Tan Sri Musa Hitam (more on this later) when it led off a critical instalment with Musa's cursory remarks on the reformasi movement.

The real story - his comments on the Umno elections and on the Prime Minister was unfortunately concealed amid the political debris.

No matter how you dislike the dailies, they understand the news business and the likes of A. Samad Ismail and A. Kadir Jasin know a real, steamy story when they see one. News is news. Malaysiakini may want to buck the trend for the sake of its convictions. Which is sad. Otherwise, it could provide instant indepth articles on the outcome of the Umno polls this week, hours before the newspapers could hit the newstands.

The news sites in any case remain disadvantaged as the traditional odds are stacked against them. Take the time factor and mobility of computers - you have yet to see a roti canai-eating, Net savvy Malaysian, reading up the day's news and analyses at the coffeeshop, or on board the LRT. Moreover, you can't go for days without reading the newspapers or watching the television.

On the contrary, there have been occasions when you simply could not find the time to read the e-mail, let alone browse the websites. It is okay to forget when it comes to the Net and e-mail.

The real rivals of Malaysian news sites are really not the Malaysian newspapers but the international sites.

You login into the Harakah daily.com, glance at what's new, and then zoom straight to the "links". One visits the Harakah website not to read its news but to access the "links". The news sites simply lack the depth and resources of the kind that belongs to the old media.

Then, there is this wholesome feel-good sensation about reading the newspapers. It is a tradition that spans decades. Newspapers' layout and contents have been refined and revamped many times over.

There are those sections that you want to read later, pages and articles to be read just before you switch off.

In short, there is a newspaper-reading and television-watching culture. There is yet to be an electronic newspaper culture. Experts have always said that the Internet cannot replace the functions of existing mediums - books, newspapers and television rank as examples. How true!

Finally, reading newspapers doesn't add to your overall anxiety, the cumulative stress. It is actually a form of therapy unless of course you are an editor of a newspaper. Try spending more than eight hours on the computer each day, and your next visit to the neurologist is imminent. At

the very least, the nerves on your neck will strain. Heard of repetitive stress injury?

The field is clear for the old media to roam, yes, provided they adjust. The ratio of newspaper circulation versus the growing population is low. Now the Internet can give newspapers an unprecedented boom.

The first to see the Internet factor in newspaper business, to my mind, is businessman Tong Kooi Ong. Any good website needs a good, wide-circulation newspaper as a lucrative outlet. Musa Hitam gave another major interview (are you prone to telling interviewees what they want to hear, Sir?) to Malaysiakini last week.

A media-savvy "retired politician", Musa knows, grudgingly perhaps, that the news sites lack the reach. Or else, his interview would have made news at the right time.

Tong, knowing that people want to read about business and politics, now seeks to control a daily, the Sun having owned the Edge. The links in this synergy will complement each other.

Analysts believe that likewise the old media will have to use the Internet to promote their main product - the newspapers, television and even radio. Does TV3 have a website?

The presentation by the old media will have to change too and the editors have long grasped this requirement.

A simple test of their determination to adapt will come in a matter of hours. For so long the media coverage of the Umno general assemblies has been handicapped by certain "traditions". Rightly, the speech by the Umno president is given prominence. Justifiably so, the full text is also used.

"But pray tell," asked a media analyst, "why does the newspapers need to get senior leaders to immediately comment on the speech?"

These "customary" reactions don't provide discerning readers with any new information. It does not add to the depth of the media coverage.

"Let the people read and chew on the president's speech and provide their own analyses," said an analyst.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad must have spent weeks to refine and fine-tune his most important speech of the year. Someone listening must spend enough time (ideally reading a copy of the speech text later) to be able to provide an intelligent comment. A newspaper could probably get a respected politician to write an authoritative piece on the Umno president's speech.

Dr Mahathir is the No 1 news source. He is news. But not off-the-cuff reactions to a speech he spent weeks to compose.