Media Usage Patterns among Chinese Voters: In Preparation for the 14th Malaysian General Election (GE14)

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Abstract

The growing popularity of networked media has given opportunities for the people in this democratic society to search for diverse information and compare information with other sources of information, thereafter making their choice to whom they want to elect and to which information they think is reliable. Notwithstanding the influential power of networked media in elections, among people who have access to this media, there are still people who just rely on traditional media or use both at the same time for information seeking. This study seeks to explore the media usage pattern of Chinese voters in Peninsular Malaysia in preparing the Malaysian 14th General Election. 10 focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in seven states, namely Selangor, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Melaka, Johor Bahru, Kota Bahru and Terengganu. A total of 95 informants of whom were eligible Chinese voters, ranging in age from 21 to 65, were invited to participate in the FGDs. The result shows that social media especially Facebook is the prominent communication and entertainment tool as well as the source of information used by majority of informants from the seven states. Our result also shows that traditional media will not be replaced by networked media, at least, at this point in time as our informants still use traditional media to verify the reliability of news on social media occasionally. The researchers suggest that strategic and effective communication plan with should be planned and implemented by using both media (i.e., traditional and social media) in coming GE14.

Keywords: media usage, Chinese voters, 14th Malaysian general election, networked media, focus group discussion (FGD)

1. Introduction

The media play an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy, and a democratic election is impossible without the media (Daniels, 2010; Jebril, Stetka, & Loveless, 2013). The general public, as the key voters, has used the mass media to obtain information on issues raised by candidates or their respective political parties when making their decisions during elections. They use mass media to discuss any issues or events that portrayed on media agenda among their peers, friends, family, etc. The significance of mass media has also extended to politicians of whom use it as a tool to inform the public about their manifestos during election campaigns. Thus, the mass media's power to impact public perception and the degree to which people are exposed to media representations make the mass media to be one of the most significant influences in these developed societies.

We, as a human, communicate every day, either at home, school, or work. We receive messages from various channels-from friends, family, colleagues, and the mass media. The mass media is a unique feature of our modern society, a society that completely depends on information and communication. However, the mass media, which have traditionally been understood as newspapers, radio and television, have become broader, encompassing networked media, such as the Internet, social networking sites like Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, blogs, etc. The growing popularity of these networked media has opened up possibilities and given opportunities for people to have unprecedented rich and online human-to-human interaction in the history of internet

communication. The members of public have been given more options in seeking for information. They consume different forms of media to fulfil their thirst for information. With the proliferation growth of the Internet and media convergence, they can compare the information reported on traditional media with information on networked media, thereafter making their choice to whom they want to elect and to which information they think is reliable. They can even now make comments or express their thoughts and feeling using new reactions feature introduced by Facebook: the five emojis (i.e., love, haha, wow, sad, or angry) on Facebook. Literature showed that participatory process from voters engaging in public debate is paramount, wherein they are able to seek for adequate information about parties, policies, candidates and the election process itself in order to make informed choices (Kavanaugh, Sheetz, Sandoval-Almazan, Tedesco, & Fox, 2016; Fourie & Otto, 2011; Kaid, McKinney & Tedesco, 2007), and this participatory process is in the assumption that the voters are active consumers of media.

Specifically, this research paper serves the purpose to: (1) better explore why people still prefer to use traditional media as a source of news while accessing to networked media has become much easier; (2) find out public's views towards the applicability of traditional media in providing adequate, balanced and honest information to the general public, especially during the general election in this digital age; and (3) explore what makes Chinese voters use certain media over the others.

2. Literature Review

Public access to accurate and reliable information is fundamental to democracy and democratic decision-making (Kavanaugh, 2016). Traditional media have historically served as a critical conduit of information to the public. However, Malaysian local media have been facing difficulties in reporting "balanced" coverage especially relating to politics since the introduction of tight laws and regulations that regulate the media (Weiss, 2012). On that count, it is difficult for the public to acquire reliable information from the media due to the constraints on freedom of the press (Kavanaugh, 2016; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963; Al-Kandari & Hasanen, 2012; Salman, Ibrahim, Hj-Abdullah, Mustaffa, & Mahbob, 2011). Freedom House gave Malaysia an aggregate score 45 (A larger aggregate score indicates a greater level of freedom) for press and internet freedom in 2016, indicating a "partly free" status (Freedom House, 2016). Despite the government's control on traditional media, the exponential growth of the Internet has provided the public an access to diverse information and opportunities for citizens and organisations to exchange information in this civic society (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Shah et al., 2001). Having said that, the exponential growth of the networked media has also posed a great challenge to traditional media. This can be seen in the drop of circulation numbers in most of the USA print newspapers (Salman et al., 2011). The circulation of newspapers (Bahasa, English, Chinese and Indian) in Malaysia also suffer a serious decline in its circulation (Table 1) (Audit Bureau Circulation [ABC], 2016).

Table 1. Circulations figures of mainstream newspapers in Malaysia: 2014 – 2015

Newspaper	Circulation 2014	Circulation 2015
Bahasa		
Utusan Malaysia	338166	317415
Berita Harian	234602	210057
Harian Metro	580093	396615
English		
New Straits Times	143523	117999
Daily Star	577504	520920
The Edge	49031	47008
Chinese		
China Press	453456	412798
Sin Chew Daily	750133	717425
Guang Ming	199054	168496
Tamil		
Makkai Osai	118302	98932

Salman et al. (2011) argued that the drop in circulation of newspapers in Malaysia may due to lacking of trust among readers of whom think that the mainstream newspapers are too government friendly and serve as the propaganda tools. When many academicians and practitioners are worried about the future of traditional media in this digital age, scholars argued that networked media will not replace newspapers, just as radio did not replace newspapers and television when it was first emerged in the society. In fact, they (both print and networked media) complement each other in distributing information to the public (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Salman et al., 2011). Salman and Hasim (2009) revealed that the younger generation and likewise generation Y students, will usually go to the Internet first, whether it be for personal, academic, or professional information.

Despite the Internet has become a major source of news and information, newspapers still remain as the main and important reading and informative document for the people to reply on because of these reasons (Salman et al., 2011). One, newspapers remain a powerful force in shaping the public agenda and influencing the outcome of debate (Newspaper Association of America, 2011). Two, newspapers remain the primary medium when consumers look for advertising, with the Internet second (Newspaper Association of America, 2011; Salman et al., 2011). Furlow (2013) opined that newspaper remain a bread-and-butter information source for many people and are still the best way to communicate certain stories. Readers who get all their news from online sources like the Huffington Post, the Daily Beast, or the websites of Fox News or CNN are still reading stories directly or indirectly produced by newspaper reporters (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 237). Moreover, the Internet is still grappling with privacy issues, content accuracy and reliability. According to Salman et al. (2011) that the Internet, for Malaysians, still has to improve its credibility. Merabi, Hassan, and Ali (2009) found that television is more credible than Internet to covey news among non-academic professionals. This suggests that people are less likely to rely on the media which do not provide credible news. As such, credibility is crucial for the Internet.

Wilson, Leong, Nge, and Ngerng (2011) found that youth still rely on traditional media to obtain news. The reason is because the traditional media (newspapers/television/radio) fail to provide sufficient information for youth and are perceived to have more censorship or legal restrictions than online news websites. In the 13th General Election held back on 5 May 2013, many young voters casted a ballot for the first time, and these voters, whose ages range between 21 – 39 years old, turned the election results in most urban constituencies in their favour (Pandian, 2014). These groups of young voters are known as "Generation Y and Z", whom they were born into digital age-a transformational generation living in a transformative time (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2014). They are also the technology-savvy age groups (Pandian, 2014). According to Pandian (2014) and Ahmad (2012), most of them are fence-sitters; considered independent minded and their political loyalties are not fixed. They have a lot of uncertainty about this country's future and politics, and are careful in casting their votes (Azhar, 2012). Due to this reason, they make sure that they are well-informed with the environment through accessing different sources of information, and one of them is through the Internet and social media. Nowadays, internet use is woven into the fabric of anyone's daily life. It is not a "privilege" for youngsters, but older generation, whom they are Generation X and Baby Boomers. They, in fact, have gradually used the Internet for various tasks such as banking and shopping online (Jones & Fox, 2009). Although there is difference between young and older generations in using the Internet for information seeking, we cannot deny that some of them do use it in daily life.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory (U & G)

News consumption has been undergoing rapid changes due to the flourishment of online media. This study adopts the Uses and Gratification Theory (U&G) of the media. Severin and Tankard Jr. (2001, p. 293-295) note that the theory was first used in an article anchored by Elihu Katz (1959) where it debunked the claim by Bernard Berelson (1959) that the field of communication research was dead. He observed that most communication research up to that time was geared at probing "What do media do to people? Katz therefore suggested attention should shift to "What do people do with the media?" The uses and gratifications approach therefore shifted focus from the purposes of the communicator to the purposes of the receiver. This approach, according to Blake and Haroldsen (1975, p. 131) contends "the interaction of people with the media can most often be explained by the uses to which they put the media content and/or the gratification which they receive."

Under the assumption of the theory is that the media users are aware of their needs and eager to seek for information. As such, they take an active role in strategically selecting a competent media, which that media is deemed able to gratify their needs and goals (Freeman, 2013; Saleeman, Budiman, & Ahmad, 2015; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000). Underlying this perspective is the assumption that the media users evaluate the available

media options and choose among the media on the basis of those evaluations (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000). When the selected media is able to provide the most gratification for the media users, then they will more likely to use the media more often than other types of media.

Malaysian news media is largely owned or indirectly controlled by the 14 political parties which constitute the ruling National Front (Kenyon & Marjorbanks, 2007). It becomes evident that media ownership is highly concentrated, with the government being a major stakeholder. With the emergence of networked media, the citizen of Malaysia have alternative to turn to the networked media, where they can get "true" coverage on a story without censorship or restriction.

Many studies have focused on understanding why and how the people use certain media, be it traditional or online media, over the others to satisfy specific needs (Luo, Chea, & Chen, 2011; McQuail, 2010; Pai & Arnott, 2013; West & Turner, 2007; Cheung & Lee, 2009; Cheung et al., 2011; Dholakia et al., 2004; Ku, Chu, & Tseng, 2013; Malik, Dhir, & Nieminen, 2016). Even though numerous studies have been conducted, the authors still accept that richer insight will emerge if the focus is on looking into the media pattern of potential voters (in this case, the Chinese voters) in the 14th Malaysian General Election.

4. Research Method

A qualitative research method-Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted in this study in order to collect in-depth data about media use patterns of Chinese voters. A total of 10 FGDs were conducted in seven states (i.e., Selangor, Kedah, Pulau Pinang, Melaka, Johor Bahru, Kota Bahru and Terengganu) in Peninsular Malaysia from August 2015 to October 2015. Ninety-five (95) informants of whom were eligible Chinese voters, ranging in age from 21 to 65, were invited to participate in the FGDs. Each FGD had 8 to 13 informants. Due to a large number of informants who were interested in participating in this research, two parallel FGD sessions were conducted in some states like Selangor, Kedah and Pulau Pinang, while Melaka, Johor Bahru, Kota Bahru and Terengganu had only one FGD session. That makes up 10 focus groups in total for all seven states. Each focus group discussion lasted for two hours. Table 2 shows the details of the FGDs conducted in seven states in Peninsular Malaysia.

Table 2. Details of Focus Group Discussion in Peninsular Malaysia

State	Selangor	Kedah	Pulau Pinang	Melaka	Johor Bahru	Kota Bahru, Kelantan	Terengganu
Date/Day	02/08/2015 (Sun)	15/08/2015 (Sat)	16/08/2015 (Sun)	26/09/2015 (Sat)	27/09/2015 (Sun)	02/10/2015 (Fri)	03/10/2015 (Sun)
Venue/Time	Puri Pujangga Hotel UKM	Sentosa Regency Hotel, Alor Setar	Vistana Hotel, Penang	Sentral Hotel, Melaka	Le Grandeur Hotel, Senai	Ridel Hotel	KT Golf Resort
No. of groups	Group 1: 10am-12pm Group 2: 2pm- 4pm	Group 1 & 2 10am-12pm (Parallel)	Group 1 & 2 10am-12pm (Parallel)	10am-12pm	10am-12pm	10am-12pm	10am-12pm
No. of informants	Group 1: 10 informants Group 2: 11 informants	Group 1: 13 informants Group 2: 8 informants	Group 1: 8 informants Group 2: 9 informants	9 informants	7 informants	10 informants	10 informants
Moderator			First author Second author			First author	

Before conducting the FGDs, the authors (Moderator A and B) briefed the informants about the research purpose, benefits and risks of this study. After that, the authors sought informants' consent before audio recording. After completing each focus group discussion, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed. In order to keep the identity of informants confidential and anonymous, their names would be replaced with the first alphabetical prefix of vehicle registration plate. In Malaysia, the first alphabetical on a vehicle registration plate indicates the state or territory prefix (e.g., Kuala Lumpur = W, Melaka = M, Johor = J, etc.). For instance, the

state prefix for Selangor is "*B*". So, informants from that state would be indicated as "*B*". If an informant is from Group 1 and first informant, then he/she would be labelled as *"B1.1"*. The same goes to Kedah, where its state prefix for the vehicle registration plate is *"K"*. Hence, an informant from that state would be labelled as *"K1.2"*, indicating that he/she is from Kedah, Group 1, and second informant. Table 3 illustrates the data interpretation details.

Table 3. Data Interpretation for Each State in Peninsular Malaysia

State (First alphabetical prefix)	Group (Prefix + Group)	Informant (Prefix + Group + Number of information)
Selangor (B)	Group 1 (B1)	B1.1 – B1.11
	Group 2 (B2)	B2.1 – B2.10
Kedah (K)	Group 1 (K1)	K1.1 – K1.13
	Group 2 (K2)	K2.1 – K2.8
Pulau Pinang (P)	Group 1 (P1)	P1.1 – P1.8
	Group 2 (P2)	P2.1 – P2.9
Melaka (M)	Group 1 (M1)	M1.1 – M1.9
Johor Bahru (J)	Group 1 (J1)	J1.1 – J1.7
Kota Bahru (D)	Group 1 (D1)	D1.1 – D1.10
Terengganu (T)	Group 1 (T1)	T1.1 – T1.10

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Media Use

This study examined the media usage patterns among Chinese voters in preparing for the 14th Malaysian General Election (GE14). From the focus group discussions, we found that social media especially Facebook is the prominent communication and entertainment tool as well as the source of information used by the majority of informants from the seven states. This shows that the younger generation will usually go to the Internet first for information. As a result, the newspaper industry, be it locally or internationally, is undergoing a much needed transformation and changes due to the exponential growth of online media. News can now be produced and disseminated through online means. As such, most of the local newspapers have adapted and adjusted to this digital age by introducing online newspapers to reach out to the people, especially to generations Y and Z (Salman et al., 2011). With just a single click on the Like button to an online newspaper page on Facebook, Facebook users can then receive a world of news at their fingertips. They can even *Like* as many online newspaper pages as they want. From the FGDs, most of the informants revealed that they can experience a diverse array of news stories, and it is faster as compared to newspapers in this digital age.

Moderator A: What types of media do you use to obtain the latest information?

B1.11: Facebook. [I] use Facebook a lot. After that, news portal links on Twitter such as Sin Chew [Daily] and even [it is] faster than newspapers.

B2.10: Normally [I use] the Internet, but it is not the one with direct links to New Straits Times or The Edge. Basically I will click those interesting online newspaper links on Facebook.

K1.12: I use Facebook and Like online news portal links.

P1.2: I like Facebook because it is full with [issues on] politics, cuisines, travel and cultural.

J1.5: I also use the Internet and Facebook. I seldom read newspapers or listen to radio channels.

M1.9: For me, my main source [of information] would be Facebook, and then I will subscribe the China Press, the soft copy, because my university pays it for me.

K2.7: Facebook is very popular nowadays because [for traditional media,] we can only read one newspaper and watch one television channel at one point in time. However, [for Facebook], we can like many online newspaper pages on Facebook like China Press, GuangMing, Sin Chew [Daily], etc. We can get the information at our fingertips. On top of that, we can read different styles of news reporting. We can also

read other people's comments, having different perspectives on an issue.

Although Facebook is a popular social media used by many, there are some informants who prefer to use WhatsApp in getting the latest information.

M1.4: I don't use Facebook. All these years, thank God for WhatsApp. I have few groups in different platforms, basically groups from the same Christian faith. All the members are ladies of different age groups. Another one [is] the mixtures of men and ladies and pastors from different states.

M1.3: I also do not have Facebook. We have a lot of groups [in WhatsApp]. [WhatsApp] is very popular. Every morning [my WhatsApp] will be congested with our news in [the group] "Bo Kia Kopitiam". We call it "Bo Kia" means "not afraid of" and in the group, there are many Malaysian Chinese Muslims.

T1.6: I am working in office, a government servant. My friends can access to the Internet. So, they share whatever information through WhatsApp. Then, I will get information from them.

5.2 Reasons of Using Traditional Media (Research Objective 1)

Wilson et al. (2011) found that 94% of surveyed urban youths still relied on traditional media (newspapers/television/radio), and the newspaper is still the most favoured traditional medium to get news followed by television and then the radio. These findings are consistent with our study, which the researchers found that apart from Facebook, the majority of informants are still consuming traditional media for information seeking. Apparently, since the emergence of the Internet, the same question has been asked over and over again among media practitioners and academicians—"Will the World Wide Web, online media, or social media become a supplement or substitute for traditional news media?" (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Salman et al., 2011; Waal, Schönbach, & Lauf, 2005; Nguyen & Western, 2006). Our result showed that traditional media will not be replaced, at least, at this point in time. This finding concurs with Salman et al. (2011). Most of the informants read newspapers, watch television news or listen to radio channels because it has been their daily routine activity. Some informants read newspapers because their family or company subscribe them, while some are very much concerned about the reliability and validity of news on social media, especially Facebook. Therefore, they verify the information they receive or read from Facebook with other sources of information such as the Internet, newspapers, radio and television channels in order to make sure its reliability.

Moderator A: Apart from using Facebook, do you read newspapers, watch television news or listen to radio channels?

K1.3: I will look for [information] on Facebook first. After that, I go to [visit] the newspaper's website because [the information on] Facebook is not reliable. Although I keep receiving information from Facebook, there is scarce of reliability. So, if I am interested in something, I will look for its official website.

J1.7: I listen to radio channel (988 FM) because most of the time I am driving. I read newspaper (Sin Chew Daily) as well because my company subscribes it.

B1.10: I do have Facebook and Twitter. Yet, I drive to school every morning and the traffic is backed up. So, during that time I will listen to radio or else I will watch TV news like "Evening Edition" on Astro AEC at night. However, often time I found most of the news have been covered.

B1.6: I read newspapers only for news like announcing the Federal Budget because [newspapers] have more detailed information.

B2.6: I do read newspaper because my family subscribes it.

T1.5: I watch television channel like TV9 and also channel from Indonesia because I subscribe it through Astro.

D1.7: I will listen to radio a bit first, then I will look for right information online.

D1.6: Because I am working. So, I will watch television (TV3) at night. I also buy and read newspaper like Berita Harian.

5.3 Public's Perceptions of the Traditional News Media (Research Objective 2)

Apart from knowing the reasons of using Facebook or online media from the informants, the authors were also interested in exploring the perceptions of Chinese voters towards traditional media – why some of them do not use traditional media like newspapers, television or/and radio. It is agreeable that the Malaysian media are closely tied to the Barisan Nasional regime, with ownership concentrated in party-linked holding companies. For instance, almost all mainstream Malay- and English-language newspapers and a number of television channels and magazines are owned by UMNO-linked conglomerate media prima and Utusan Melayu group (Weiss, 2012). This is why majority of informants of whom do not read newspapers, watch television news or/and listen to radio

channels deem that the media in Malaysia are being controlled by the government and the news portrayed on these media are not reliable. They revealed that the media in Malaysia are bias in favour of the current government. As such, most of the news have been covered and are controlled by the editors. This finding is in line with many researches done previously (Kavanaugh, 2016; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963; Al-Kandari & Hasanen, 2012; Salman et al., 2011). Some informants even said that it is wasted their time and money to buy newspapers which are bias.

M1.3: In Malaysia, I notice that it is hard for us to obtain reliable news; that's a fact. They [newspapers] cannot speak. The government controls the media.

J1.1: The government has shares in media organisations such as MCA, The Star, Nanyang and others. They filter news related to opposition parties. We can see the difference. Nevertheless, sometimes we also have to consider the reliability of news on online media as well.

P1.2: I still remember that there was a time I could read whatever news that my friends posted [on social media] in the UK. Yet, if you read Malaysian local news, all are blocked and censored.

D1.4: I do not agree to read newspapers; I am serious. Newspapers belong to the government. You can see this clearly where newspapers always say good things about the government. It is unlike television news in Thailand and its newspapers, they are very open; their photos also different [as compared to media in Malaysia]. For instance, during the Bersih rally, Thailand's television channels reported everything, but all contents [related to Bersih] had been cut in Malaysian media.

5.4 Preference of Using Certain Media (i.e., Facebook) (Research Objective 3)

Through the focus group discussions, the majority of informants would rather prefer to use Facebook as one of the sources of information because it is a trend and popular among youngsters as well as ease of access. Although the people use their mobile data to access the Internet, Facebook or WhatsApp, they still consider that getting information from Facebook is free as they do not need to buy newspapers at the market.

Moderator A: In general, most of you rely on online media and some are still using traditional media like newspapers, radio and television. I wish to know why you choose online media over traditional media.

B2.6: It is more convenient.

B2.4: It has been a routine [activity].

B2.2: It is a trend; I just follow my friends' steps.

B2.10: Its reliability. Because same news on Facebook will be reported differently in traditional media.

M1.7: I do not have time [reading newspapers or using other media].

J1.3: I think there is first-hand information. Facebook will keep me updated of those first-hand information.

J1.8: [Facebook] is more brave in reporting [sensitive news] than traditional media.

K1.2: We can watch more videos [on Facebook] longer than television.

D1.5: It is more latest. If you compare Berita Harian, all its news are "yesterday news". It seems like we have already known the news and after that they publish. It is unlike the online media, which report instant news.

6. Conclusion

The emergence of the Internet has challenged the status quo. More people are having access to different media forms that are totally different from the media of decades ago. In this study, several important results merit further consideration and future research. Our study suggests that Chinese voters in Peninsular Malaysia use Facebook mainly as a source of information and traditional media as a secondary source of news. The reasons are because Facebook is faster and convenient for the people to seek for diverse information. This finding is consistent with When media industry people and academicians are worried about the future of traditional media which may be replaced by online media one day, our analysis shows that Chinese voters still use traditional media to verify the reliability and validity of news and information on Facebook or the Internet, a finding consistent with a study done by Salman and his colleagues (2011). Despite the Internet has become a major source of news and information in recent years, traditional media still remain as the main and important conduit of information for the members of public to reply on. The Internet is grappling with privacy issues, content accuracy, reliability and other concerns, and all these may pose another great challenge to online news in future (Salman et al., 2011). We conclude that traditional media use in Malaysia is still applicable, and online media will not replace the traditional media as a source of news, at least, not at this point in time. Moreover, our

analysis also shows that majority of Chinese voters who had participated in the FGDs revealed that the Malaysian government controls the local traditional media. Malaysia's newspapers and television news programmes heavily favour the ruling coalition, giving it more positive coverage over the opposition. Due to this reason, the advent of online media has given opportunities for the people to get more "balanced" news with regard to country's developmental issues.

Social media have no doubt become popular among young voters who are indeed the most important political leverage that determines the political landscape of the nation. A major application of the results of this study is that strategic and effective communication plan with the constituencies should be planned and implemented by using both media (i.e., traditional and social media). Current country issues should also be openly and honestly discussed on the media agenda in both traditional and social media so as to win the confidence of Chinese voters in preparation for the 14th Malaysian General Election. As with any study, our conclusions are only as good as the data from which they are drawn. The results of this study challenge the conventional research method used in other studies. Therefore, longitudinal or cross-sectional survey method can be used in the future studies in order to dwell into more information about the media behaviour and usage pattern of voters in Malaysia, thereafter generalising the results to the population in Malaysia.

Acknowledgement

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