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## **Intermediary as such: Observation on the Power of Eating Online**

**Chan Wai-wai**

### 1. Introduction

The emergence of various platforms provides information on how a person should live. The way he wears, the food he eats, the place he lives, and the people he encounters on internet left the footprint - or data - as a reference to certain platforms and websites he visited. Such referencing is achieved through different kinds of algorithm the platform used or heavily monitored by the engineers at the back-end. What they have done, however, faded out from the sense. They manage to change, not in the scale of evolution through, in every move we make in praise of the Internet and social media. Castells (2005, p. 7) had stated that any polarized writing about the paradise or the evil of internet is nothing but the same mythology propagated by consultants and futurologists. This article does not attempt to form another myth in blaming the control of machines and networks. Such identification of norms and mechanisms of a platform that we believe causing immense impact is needed as a result in knowing more the construction of today's socio-techno environment we live in. In doing so, this article draws the attention to a local platform to observe the plausible impact it does to the society, or part of the society. The basic analysis model comes from Jose van Dijck (2013) in viewing the chosen platform. The analysis would mainly focus on the content, the business models and the users concerning the norms it generates. With the help of other platform, the impact is greater than it expected.

The platform named OpenRice, which is considered to be one of the largest platforms providing information about dining and enable users to comment on the restaurants

they have visited. The platform "is positioned to be neutral and free of charge for the users (Openricers)". In 2009, the OpenRice Hong Kong recorded 50 million pageviews and claimed to be the most popular dining guide in Hong Kong. Nonetheless, the path lays for the Openricers (are called as "food critic") imposing a concept of quality lifestyle that itself serves way beyond a dining information provider. Craving for professional food connoisseur among ordinary people is actually the key to establish a neutral image of the platform, as it leaves a space for the users to be engaged in "striking for excellence" for the restaurant directly, creating a mirage between the users and the restaurants while situating itself in a safe zone.

## 2. Inside the review

### **a. Empowering "Food Critics"**

To begin with, one should focus on analyzing the reviews written by Openricers carefully. As it is said to be a collaborative platform that relies heavily on firsthand information and recommendation engines, however, operators of OpenRice consider reading and selecting the satisfied reviews as their primary concern. "Web 1.5 is the key to achievement of OpenRice nowadays", the founder Ray Chung claimed. (Next Magazine, 26 June 2008) According to an internet post written by ARDELL (2008), the concept of 'Web 1.5' was considered to be:

*Where the information is conveyed differently by the industry practitioner;  
but the industry practitioner doesn't understand that .5 of the "added value"  
comes from the commenter who disagrees with the post or adds more info  
than the post itself conveys.*

It might suggest the power relations between members and the owner in a more hierarchical relationship. It is said to be an effective strategy deployed by the operators to withhold the neutral position and image OpenRice bring upon to their current and future visitors. Within the framework of Web 1.5, it is questionable whether the neutrality of this platform could still be obtained. But the founder also stated the side where the platform stands, "It allows the web users to voice out their opinion. We will never compromise with any restaurants." (Jiu Jik, 3 July 2007)

While observing the content on most of the reviews, the element that constitutes an appropriate review is not that user-friendly and user-empowerment, instead, the key element of generating a proper review is determined by the platform.

The observation started with a restaurant named Thai Yue. It ranked 10 out of 10 at the Weekly Restaurant Chart. Among all the reviews it received (38 smiling faces / 0 OK / 0 crying face), there was one written by an Openricer "Da Xi Wen" that has been labelled as "non-review" (OpenRice 2015, Tai Yue, p. 3). According to OpenRices' user menu, any text listed as "non-review" is highly possible due to reasons like: (1) contents aim at describing/attacking a specific incident; (2) contents do not involve in any comment (smiling face/OK/crying face) on the served food (OpenRice 2015, User menu, para. 8). These two reasons are ambiguous as they do not further explain what "specific incident" should be excluded. On the other hand, it is strange for users not to leave the comment face as it is a major feature that constitutes the ranking system of OpenRice. I have also made a search of a restaurant nearby called Man Shun Restaurant, it only received one review and it is also classified as "non-review". The tight control in defining proper review is a strong tool - not for the Openricers though, but for the operator in better business decision making, and this would discuss below.

However, even with such strong censorship, the number of Openricers still has grown. The lure of being a professional food critic is tempting, perhaps. The No. 1 Critique of the Best Critique Chart named 'supersupergirl' (2006), she has 4,770 fans and 174 followers. In the personal description column, she wrote:

*ⓈⓊⓅⓔⓇⓈⓊⓅⓔⓇⓖ⓲ⓇⓁ, a British expat who luvs2eat. ☆★  
Eating good food is partly luck, @ da right place, @ da right time and  
moment the food is served. Food should be eaten at appropriate  
temperatures too, as they taste different at different temperatures,  
especially when it is hot, you can't really taste the real taste.*

This Openricer is also an active user of different social media channels. She listed out her account on Facebook, Weibo, Google Blogger and Instagram. It is possible to observe that such individual is a professional netizen with her fame built on the network trace. It is not a surprising fact though, most of the Openricers benefit from this platform by putting a lot of photos and commenting properly (at least no aggressive attack). Even the platform is said to be a product of Web 1.5, it is the de-centralization of the authority in food critics merged into most users' vision. In 2008, OpenRice modified the service of the platform to add in more personal features, with the implementation of "My Openrice", users could basically build up their own corner (Sing Tao Daily, 10 May 2008). The "empowerment" seems to be heading in different directions - to centralize a group of famous Openricers through ranking, allowing follows and fans adding as such to build a more hierarchical system with the platform operator on top.

**b. Which one is the Weekly-Best?**

Beside the ambiguity of the reviews it contains, the voice of the restaurants seems to be neglected in this two-sided relationship. However, a report from Next magazine had mentioned that a local restaurant "Si Sun Fast Food Restaurant" gained huge success with the help of OpenRice recommendation. Before that, it only serves the surrounding neighbors as it is located in a remote area in Hung Hom (Next Magazine, 26 June 2008). It might not be the only example among 79,868 (OpenRice 2015, Home) restaurants recorded in OpenRice, but it is also certain that many of their reputations have been affected because of the comments and reviews.

It is not as simple as good or bad or No. 1 restaurant inside the OpenRice platform that rules out number of dining halls. The ranking system also includes Best Service, Best Decor; Most Popular, Best Dessert, Best High-End, Best Chill Out Place, Most Bookmarked and Best Rating + Seaview (OpenRice 2015, Other Charts).

These charts are based on data given by Openricers - Taste, Decor, Service, Hygiene and Value for money- with cumulative totals, number of pageviews and total bookmarks. The calculation thus not only included the number of "smiling faces" they earned, but also the 5 marking areas they scored eventually determine their position. The example mentioned above (Thai Yue) illustrates how the ranking system works: only 38 smiling faces are quite enough to get one on the list, so the restaurant would tend to make their bargain with the Openricers or the newcomers. One restaurant had this attempt to boost up its scores. In May 2015, a report described "Hee Kee Crab General" invited public to join their food sampling event and gained HK\$200 for "transportation subsidy" if they fulfilled the requirement that each individual to write a positive review on OpenRice afterward. The platform soon took action by stopping all comments given to "Hee Kee" (Apple Daily, 23 May 2015).

One could actually view the score as an uncontrollable asset to a restaurant as it slowly developed into a form of reputation. This would only be achieved by numerous pageviews. The popularity growth perhaps having no direct relation to what Ray Chung said "neutrality and allowing web users voice out", rather, the support from other platforms might also be the key to its success.

### 3. With the help of Google Map

In this section, I would try to identify the function of Google Map in the platform which focuses on dining location. OpenRice does not just take the help of the map and tagging restaurants, it modifies the map and adds up specificities to suit its need to get customer surrounded by new taste and recommended cuisines.

Before going into the discussion on multiple platforms coordination, Google Map has its own unique and tremendous impact on internet usage nowadays. Gordon (2007) has described Google Map as "The dynamic capabilities of Google's mapping software would give every user the tools to produce a cognitive map - a personal expression of order and location in an expanding network." He then mentioned the "personal expression of order and location" as giving driving directions, providing street view, giving details about streets and buildings, recording past search results, sorting search results, and most importantly, the GPS service pinpoints ones' location and routes arriving at that location. The Google Map defines a person in terms of spatial dimension, personal expression is within click and if necessary, tagging the place when it is needed.

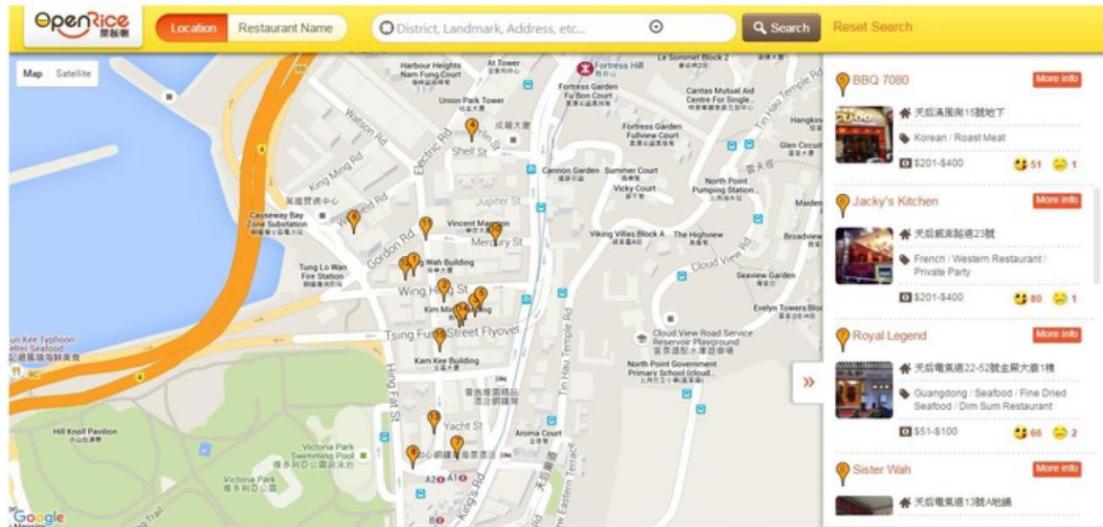


Fig. I (OpenRice 2015, Map Search)

By taking the personal feature as a base, OpenRice steps further. It adds its own characteristic as a dining guide. It enables pinpoint location by typing the name whenever a person looks for that specific restaurant. If visitors cannot decide which to go for, it will provide the surrounding choice for them by typing the type of cuisine or landmark in order to narrow down the possibilities to suit users need. (See Fig. 1)

Even the page with detail description about certain restaurant would the system made such recommendation. It selects nearby dining halls through its database, or restaurants that are already promoting their business. It also indicates that the recommendation might not suit the users actually.



Fig. 2 (OpenRice, Chung Kee Noodle, p. 1)

Fig.2 has displayed such form of recommendation. The picture was captured from the page of “Chung Kee Noodle” located in Tin Hau. However, one of the nearby dining place it suggested located in 830 miles away. It is certainly not an appropriate option to viewers to go there, but it demonstrates the commercial usage of Google Map in directing people to give it a try in the future. Not only it helps to promote more consumption that benefits the business sector (restaurants), the numerous choices shown to the viewers motivate them to constantly keep moving in search for better food. Unlike Twitter or Facebook, one need not be registered as a member to view the content, without the spell of "password and personal information provided", non-Openricers thrill to obtain the mapping service and are fed up with the "collaborative knowledge" provided by the Openricers.

#### 4. The intermediary of OpenRice as a two-sided platform

It is certain that OpenRice plays an intermediary role between the restaurants and the

viewers (customers). I would like to call it a two-sided platform concerning the role it plays. Bakos & Katsamakos (2014) defined two-sided platform as follow:

*... are characterized by cross-side network externalities between two types of participants. Because both sides are needed for the network to succeed, intermediaries face a "chicken-and-egg" problem. An emerging literature on two-sided networks focuses on the appropriate pricing to coordinate the two sides, and thus induce participation and maximize the intermediary's profit.*

This concept first applies to platforms like eBay, Yahoo! Auction and Taobao, however, it is also considerable for platform like OpenRice as goods have exchanged through this social media actually. Reputation, good will, and fame are valuable assets to both the restaurant and the Openricers. The OpenRice case also firmly illustrates the "chicken-and-egg" problem as it happens when it received legal letters sent by the restaurants. Although those restaurants shut down before they brought up lawsuits (Jiu Jik, 3 July 2007), it still had to react in order to respond to the potential threats.

The strategic implementation of various settings and configurations has actually balanced the two sides without facing direct conflicts. The introduction of Web 1.5 has made data impossible to track down as it is enclosed within the platforms' data set. While the disclosure of content only limits to the comments and reviews written by users in satisfaction to the "democracy" of the platform, those so called business secrets such as relations of specified restaurants in exchange for commercial opportunities with large sum of profits had never been disclosed. The only thing we know is the amount it earned afterward: HK\$50,000 in average per day ('iMoney'

2008). The appropriation price between two sides also gives it another unexpected effect - an image of a neutrality platform, and what's more, I would argue, is the norms it shaped in defining the symbolic meaning of food.

##### 5. Let us consume, not the food, but the quality of life

"Since I created this platform, I become pickier about what to eat." (Jiu Jik, 3 July 2007) It is said by the founder Ray Chung. This statement indeed catches the heart of many Openricers. The launch of the platform intertwines with the cultural meaning on dining within this region, but it is more than that. As the platform continues to expand and to perform a better intermediary between dining halls and viewers, it encourages not to pay a constant visit to restaurants with good quality, but to search for new places in a non-stop pace. The insatiable search stimulates competitions inside the platform, the more the people could find, the harder the restaurants have to fight for getting into the top 10 list.

On the other hand, the platform allows people looking for friends and meets in the real world to eat and to share the joy of having good food, and chills out together (Chan, 3 Feb. 2005). A platform might achieve this wish, but appeared to be at doubtful location it recommended. It solely excluded the chain restaurants and only selected some of the local fast food restaurants. The "Si Sun Fast Food Restaurant" mentioned above has its history dated back to 1950s'. The taste of the old timer would be the theme for OpenRice to engage with its promotion. The consumption indeed changed, as Baudrillard (quoted from Sliverstone, 1999, p. 80) stated, "Consumption is an active mode of relations, a systematic mode of activity and a global response on which our whole cultural system is founded". The daily needs for food is termed

consumption where we have to go outside for food. With food consumption, one would start to figure out the taste of local, the taste of global, and the taste of quality. If we could think more about the ranking system the platform proposed, the language of consumption and taste are there. The service, the hygiene and the value of money have no relation to constitute a good-taste food, but they weighted the same as the taste score. If a restaurant has the best service and hygienic place to serve, pricing reasonably while the quality of the food is on average, it would still get to the list of Best Service Chart. The redefinition of quality food has shaped the way we consume food, and the quest for better quality continues.

## 6. Conclusion

The article discussed the business model it laid behind the scenes, the dynamics of the platform users and the norms it possibly formulated. However, it is not about one platform, but multiple platforms served as wheels to make a push. While Google Map is spatially customized the need for dinner and food, Facebook and Weibo make up a majority of platform. The layer of this complexity might be seen as current network environment. They intertwine with each other, and at the same time, they fill the emptiness to individual in something more than information- they constantly show the lives of others, define life with others as the example. OpenRice performed this vision to all, though, as we do not need password to access to the lives of others. Photos and comments, the money they paid, the events that they came across break down our spatial concept, and feeding us with other spatial character that we eager to search for more.

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