Changes in Modern Japanese Social and Cultural Currents (8)

A New Style of Vice Is the Internet to Blame?

By Nakano Osamu

1. Pseudonyms and affinity

A considerable number of people, most of whom were in all likelihood potentially suicidal, maintained quite in-depth communications, chatting about how to commit suicide, on an Internet homepage named "Dr. Kiriko's Consultation Room."

There have always been a certain percentage of people in any given period of history who harbor a desire to commit suicide. These people commit suicide when given the opportunity. I do not approve of suicide. Yet I acknowledge the fact that there are people who want to commit suicide and that some of them actually do so. This is the way the evolution of humans as a species has turned out.

It may be correct to acknowledge that a small percentage of those considering suicide, who represent only a small portion of the entire population, are regular users of the Internet. And a few of them actually meet each other at Dr. Kiriko's consultation room. Their number is estimated at less than 100, but may actually total several hundreds.

I am not a regular user of the Internet. But I am acquainted with a large number of habitual Internet users, maniacs and freaks, and occasionally spend time with them. Simple operation of the computer enables the retrieval of various pieces of information. Information available on the Internet includes knowledge about the unknown, or more precisely unexpected information about "the unknown." Thus, modest encounters with "the unknown" are repeated on the Internet, offering excitement, small wonders and modest, yet realistic, ecstasy. I can understand why habitual Internet users get hooked on the Internet. Incidentally, my usual work has nothing to do with

"the unknown" or unpredictable matters. This is why I do not use the Internet.

It is safe to assume that in Dr. Kiriko's consultation room, a large number of Internet users, by using pseudonyms, continue conversations that would be practically impossible using real names or in conversations face-to-face. They engage in such dialogue half seriously and half-enjoying the sense of danger associated with such sensitive topics. Furthermore, a large number of those considering suicide, perhaps several times the number of visitors to Dr. Kiriko's homepage, follow the conversations as observers. A communication space similar to Dr. Kiriko's consultation room are scale exists on any homepage. This is not surprising considering the nature of the Internet.

The nature, style and content of conversations held in Dr. Kiriko's consultation room are neither extraordinary nor abnormal in the world of the Internet.

Now that electronic commodity trading and electronic money trading are commercially viable, it is taken for granted that people use the Internet to buy or sell commodities and remit money to banks.

By using pseudonyms on the Internet, people can talk about very personal matters, even about suicide. They talk about their desire to commit suicide, and their conversation partners respond with sympathy and understanding. Their conversations refer to the availability of poison, a topic which would never arise in face-to-face conversations or conversations between friends or acquaintances. Recently, such conversations did actually lead to a suicide. The suicide became inevitable when Internet conversations of a virtual

nature became a reality. The conversation partner who offered the cyanide capsules, surprised by the unexpected development, ended up committing suicide himself too. But the story does not end here.

When news of the suicides broke, the reaction of the public, including the mass media, was that the Internet, particularly the anonymous nature of the conversations, was responsible for the suicide. They argued that Internet conversations under pseudonyms often resulted in suicide. This argument is easy to understand, but is contrary to the facts.

As I have stated, people who participate in or follow conversations in Dr. Kiriko's consultation room either have a desire to commit suicide or are extraordinarily interested in suicide. Statistics show that the rates of suicides in each age bracket of society are almost identical when social conditions are stable. Several years ago, after a popular singer committed suicide, a large number of his young fans committed suicide in imitation. But that year the total number of suicides was unchanged from the normal annual average regardless of the age bracket. This suggests that any person who committed suicide with poison obtained through the Internet would have done so in some other way if the Internet had not been available.

The emergence of the Internet changes the entire process of suicide including the way poison is procured. When people meet on the Internet, why are they tempted to talk intimately about suicide, a very private matter which they would never discuss with parents or siblings, let alone with friends or teachers? It may have something to do with the use of pseudonyms. Even so, until now it was not the custom of

Japanese people to talk to complete strangers. It seems to me that the Internet has created an entirely different kind of intimacy and personal relations.

One of the key roles of the media is to serve as a facilitator of human relations in a broader sense. It is no wonder that the emergence of a new type of media creates a new form of human relations. Behind the creation of a different type of intimacy lie various factors. The Internet is only one of them.

2. Media community

Language is the first medium created by humans. Various media followed, with the Internet as the most recent example. Each new medium brings with it the creations of new patterns of civilization, either directly or indirectly. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press raised literacy levels, which became the precondition of democracy and equality. The Internet will undoubtedly give rise to a new pattern of civilization, though it may take hundreds of years before this can be substantiated.

Media have generated new civilizations. The development and introduction of electronic media, in particular, has had a strong impact on civilization, and more directly, on human relationships, which may be counted as culture in a broad sense. Already more than 30 years ago, as early as the 1960s, all-night radio broadcasting started, which led to the widespread use of transistor radios by individuals. High school students and cram school students preparing for university exams were members of this audience. Some listeners sent letters to disk jockeys from every corner of the country. The letters, signed with pseudonyms, have created a huge forum for communications with radio waves and disk jockeys serving as the media. Listeners of these all-night talk shows totaled as many as 1 million. In this way, a huge mass media emerged.

This medium, called "Alternative Forum," was not visible. Nor did it exit physically. It was an illusory commune created via a radio network.

With radio, communications expand in a chain reaction, with people sending in responses to the original letter aired on a program.

By using pseudonyms, young people can talk about very personal matters they would never discuss with their parents, siblings or teachers. I heard one youth confess that he could relax more in Internet correspondences than he could at home. Newspaper readers in the early 19th century, whose numbers were still very limited, had also formed a community of their own in a unique way. This was perhaps the first media community preceding the emergence of a community of radio listeners. This community of radio listeners was formed by strangers that extended beyond the framework of families, regional communities, schools and workplaces. Relationships in this community were very intimate.

In general, people can talk intimate matters because they use pseudonyms, are not acquainted with each other or are never likely to meet each other. It is a special intimacy, available only on late-night radio broadcasts, and entirely different from traditional intimacy in families, communities, schools and workplaces.

Intimacy of a similar nature has appeared since then in various forms. Communities using the radio as their media still remain though their scale has shrunk compared with the 1960s. Communities using media other than radio appeared one after another in the 1970s. Among these are a community formed by the contributors to particular periodicals, such as the Takarajima. Others include a group of comics fanatics scattered all over the country who enjoy parodying and copying comics characters, and a group who wear costumes similar to those worn by the characters in comics and animation films. Another group talks on the phone for hours late at night, while another group of friends and drinking companions play tennis and go skiing and go on overseas tours together. In all these communities, the members do not see each other in their daily lives. Even if they did, they would contact each other only casually and only for a few hours. They hardly maintain face-to-face communications. But when they meet each other through a particular medium, like a magazine, a comic book, a telephone or at the pub, they develop very intimate relationships.

(Note: Takarajima is a monthly magazine which provides a forum for readers to exchange opinions.)

The development and introduction of electronic media has, in a broad sense, been continuing since the 1970s. Examples include pagers, faxes, cellular phones, personal computers, game machines, telephones, and videos. Letters are now sent via fax, PCs have been converted into communication devices, telephones are creating a new communication space in the form of secret telephone clubs, etc., and magazines have become a medium for exchanging personal information. These media communities were accompanied by other media communities that differed from traditional communities, or were directly involved in their emergence.

Needless to say, the Internet is such an example. When trouble occurs, the mass media is held responsible, and the Internet is singled out as the culprit.

The intimacy, which enabled the sale of poisonous cyanide capsules, is extremely unique. Such intimacy never existed in traditional communities, except under exceptionally serious circumstances, as in a collective family suicide. Such intimacy was brought about by the Internet. I understand why the Internet creates such intimacy. Even so, theoretically and strictly speaking, the Internet fosters unique intimacy, but is not the direct cause of the

trading of poisonous substances. Here, the media is being utilized as a modern convenience for both good and bad purposes. There have even been cases where language has killed people. An overwhelming majority of regular Internet users were neither addicts nor drug traders and didn't use the Internet for criminal purposes. It is only that such communities spawned by a new media enable the formation of new relationships, and thus can create a new type of human welfare and cause a new type of crime.

3. The background behind these incidents

After a 14-year-old boy was arrested in Kobe in early 1998 for killing and beheading an elementary school boy in the child's own neighborhood, a flood of information on his private life was circulated over the Internet. Curious Internet users who were at first amused were disgusted by the perverse nature of the crime and the vast availability of information. People who provided the information paid no heed to the offender's human rights, his privacy, his personality, his human quality and his future. They went beyond the limits of pleasure-seeking and completely ignored the social rules, doing anything they wanted.

The inhuman nature of those providers of the information was more vicious than that of the people who peddled poison over the Internet. This episode reminded me of the strength of the human desire for vice and immorality. Ethical control does not work on people who enjoy exposing the privacy of other people. I wondered how far people will go in exposing other people's privacy and whether they are allowed do so. Is it acceptable for them to go so far if we were to invoke personal freedom or human nature? It is not because of the Internet that people go so far.

I often have similar reflections on public transport. In trains, broadcasts are repeatedly made asking passengers to refrain from using cellular phones because they disturb other people. Some obey, but young people frequently continue to use cellular phones, pretending they did not hear the announcement. Their expressions, attitudes and manners show that they feel little guilt about violating social rules. Perhaps they are not aware they are doing something wrong. Should they be reproached, perhaps they would turn defiant, and say "So what?" in a threatening manner.

In January, the media reported on a murder case involving two Internet users. A young man talked to a young woman on the Internet, dated her, knocked her out with a sedative, robbed her and left her on the ground outdoors in sub-zero weather, well aware that she would die from hypothermia. The woman, on her part, responded to a call from a stranger and was easily deceived into taking drugs. The young man is suspected of killing several others in a similar manner.

In reaction to the case, some people blamed the use of the Internet, saying that such Internet contacts conducted in pseudonyms can be abused if the users have bad intentions. Pseudonyms can be put to bad use. But in this case the use of pseudonyms was not to blame. The actions of both people resulted, in one way or another, from their ignorance of how to get along with others in the world, their lack of regard for social norms, complete apathy for fellow human beings, and full condonation of such desires. People who blame the Internet paging service for the case are actually making the Internet a scapegoat.

In the spiritual environment of postwar Japan, which includes the educational system, people cannot gain morals in the broad sense, and it seems education is not aimed at instilling such morality. Freedom and liberation were regarded as ideals of education. Education instead affirmed everything inherent in humans and allowed such human nature to go unrestricted. The formation of human character was ignored.

People who deal in poisonous drugs have a field day on the Internet and ignore social rules. The assailant and the victim of the Internet paging case are identical, in that they have no character that should have been instilled through education.

Some attribute the absence of such character to the prewar absolutist education which denied human subjectivity. But, as I see it, there were social norms against robbery, murder and physical assault up to the 1960s, which restrained people. After the 1970s, things began to change. As before, people, fearing danger, tried to minimize contacts with strangers and didn't get too involved with other people. There are now fewer social rules on how to interact with other people. And, with values becoming more relative,(and the standard of good and evil becoming more individualistic), killings, robberies and assaults are on the rise and people's moral consciousness is getting weaker. In short, postwar education, not prewar education, is to blame.

For example, the overall number of murder cases has not increased sharply. But social rules and people's sense of morality are weakening, and the internal standard of good and evil is becoming abstract. If old standards are to be applied, social and human evils may be on the increase. The media influences the evils (or crimes) and their form. This is a structural characteristic of the media community, and represents the inherent intimacy of the community. The incidents of the past several months bear witness to this. **JJTI**

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