

Social Networking Service (SNS) in Japan

– Likely to Have Bigger Presence Than Blogs –

By Kitada Akihiro

Students' Interest Changing

Eight years have passed since I began teaching media studies at the university. In the very first lecture every year, I always make it a point to ask my students what kind of media they would like me to take up during the course. The replies to this question have changed considerably over the years. At the end of the 1990s, television – the king of mass communication – was top on the request list. However, toward the end of the 20th century, which was the era of mass media, my students were asking me to talk not about the telephone, but about the portable telephone including the PHS (personal handyphone system).

It was about this time that I noticed that my efforts to draw the attention of students by talking about television and *manga* were not succeeding as before. Unlike my former students, they did not seem to completely grasp what I was talking about. Apparently, many students were no longer looking to communication with others through content (information provided by the mass media). Instead, they were turning toward personal media such as the mobile phone to engage in their own communication. I could not but feel the trend was shifting from “consumption of content” to “consumption of communication.”

When I talked about trendy movies and TV dramas, students would look bored, but when I started talking about mobile phones, they would perk up. I found this strange at first since I am of the generation brought up on TV and *manga*, but there was no denying that what young people were looking for was not “content” but “communication.” Students were also very interested in Internet communication such as “2 Channel,” Japan’s largest message board. Consequently, during the last few years, I have structured my lectures around two topics: portable communication (cell-phones and email) and Internet communication such as message boards.

SNS More Energetic Than Blogs

Since around last year, however, a shift in interest among students seems to have occurred, although subtly. Students are still keen on cell-phones, but their interest in message boards and blogs seems to

have waned, and they seem to be increasingly keen on social networking services (SNS) such as *mixi*. There are students who talk tirelessly about *mixi*. Some tell me about their addiction to *mixi*, and how they get caught up in “flare-ups” which are like online quarrels. I myself also use *mixi*, and on days that I talk about SNS, many of my students take a look at my online journal the same evening.

During the blog boom a few years ago, it did not seem to me that a lot of students were that interested in blogs, but apparently this is not the case with SNS. For today’s students, SNS seems to have become an indispensable communication medium. Of course, the blog is continuing to evolve, but from what I have seen in the past year or so, I get the impression there is more energy in SNS. SNS is also popular in other countries such as the United States and South Korea, but from my observation of the SNS boom in the last year or two, there seems to be a uniquely Japanese factor involved. I would like to give here a very brief explanation of the current Internet culture in Japan, while making comparisons between the blog and SNS.

SNS & Blogs: Shared Roles

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, there were 16.51 million people in Japan who view blogs (at least once a month) at the end of March 2005. In 2007, the number is estimated to double. In fiscal 2004, the blog market was worth ¥680 million. Including related markets, the blog market was worth ¥3.4 billion. The blog has become a phenomenon whose social and economic significance can no longer be overlooked. Meanwhile, around 1.11 million people were using SNS at the end of March 2005. Of them, 800,000 were active users (at least once a month). The number of people using *mixi*, the biggest SNS in Japan, topped one million in August 2005. A total of 29 million diaries and 225,000 communities are said to exist in *mixi*, and the numbers are continuing to multiply at a rapid pace.

Of course, the currently growing blogs and SNS are not “new” media from the viewpoint of function. Before the emergence of blogs and SNS, there were Internet pages, rental diaries and message boards already available, and they functioned as (1) places

to produce opinions that were an alternative to mainstream mass media and journalism, and (2) places for communication with other people based on the assumed presence of a third party or audience. These functions existed before SNS, but blogs and SNS each skillfully inherited and expanded these functions, growing rapidly. Making a very broad categorization, I think it possible to say that blogs and SNS inherited and expanded the functions of (1) and (2), respectively.

What is the foremost characteristic of blogs is that they can act as an alternative means of media. The spawning of multifaceted spaces of information such as blogs has the potential of significantly changing the field of journalism that has so far been dominated by the mass media. In the United States, there was an incident where Dan Rather, the famous anchor of "CBS Evening News," quit the network after bloggers examined reports that US President George W. Bush had allegedly evaded military service. In Japan, too, bloggers are daily examining the authenticity of mass media reports. Blogs are steadily eroding the privileges held by mass media journalism and this trend is unlikely to stop.

■ Bigger Presence in Cyberspace

Meanwhile, SNS is taking a slightly different direction from blog and seems to be expanding its function as a medium of communication. In studies on the cell-phone and cell-phone messages, it is often pointed out that the use of these devices is consummatory. In other words, the use is an end in itself. The devices are being used not to exchange information regarding a specific affair, but to confirm bonds with other people. It is communication for the purpose of simply communicating. Such usage has been observed on message boards such as 2 Channel, but has become more prominent with SNS.

Unlike message boards, which can be accessed and read by anyone, people using SNS are less anonymous and it is easier to hold discussions, sharing common ground. Since a sense of kinship is the premise for SNS, it becomes easy for "communication for the sake of communication" to be conducted. There is often talk about SNS being a new kind of dating service site, but it seems there are relatively few people who use SNS to meet strangers.



Japan's largest social networking service, mixi, has a growing membership approaching 7 million since its launch in February 2004. The term mixi has been coined from "mix" and "i" (symbolizing a person).

According to the survey by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, more than 80% said they were using SNS as a communication tool for exchanges with people they know. SNS can be called a medium that fosters intimacy.

Since I am a sociologist and not a futurist, I cannot foresee how exactly blogs and SNS will evolve in Japan. However, seeing the strong interest that contemporary students have in SNS and the students' unexpectedly cool attitude toward blogs, there seems to be no doubt that SNS has the possibility of becoming a huge phenomenon in Japan.

Various research studies on youths show that since the 1990s, the tendency has become strong for young Japanese people to value relationships and closeness with those around them. (Not that this means that their interest in public matters has decreased.) Rather than blogs, which offer alternative media, it is likely SNS, which allows people to confirm their ties with those whom they are close to, will become a bigger presence in cyberspace. If this scenario becomes a reality, the face of Internet culture in Japan will probably be very different from that of Internet cultures in the United States and South Korea. We are still in a trial-and-error period, and we need to make an objective observation of the changes that will come up in Japan's Internet culture.

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