

Social Media: Disaster and Civil Society

Muneo KAIGO
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Tsukuba

Abstract

Some brief considerations on the role of social media in situations of disaster.

Keywords: legacy mass media, social media, freedom of press, social capital

Many problems exist with the traditional or legacy mass media in Japan. The World Press Freedom Index currently ranks Japan sixty-first and this dismal state is in deep contrast to the ranking in 2009, when Japan used to be eleventh in the world. There are various possible explanations for such a drop in ranking. One is the way the exclusive ‘press clubs’ in Japan currently act as gatekeepers of information related to various government institutions, and these clubs are also a reason for journalists in Japan having such a low degree of freedom. The nuclear disaster of Fukushima Daiichi was exemplary of the lack of freedom of coverage, and the new Secrecy Law (Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets (12/2014) [*Tokutei Himitsu no Hogo ni kansuru Horitsu*]) does not help either. The government has virtual control over television networks as the medium is licensed and needs to be renewed annually. More recently, problems of impartiality have been observed in the news coverage by Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK). The sum of all this has resulted in a gradual trend over the past decade in general decline in usage of traditional media among the population. In comparison, there is possible hope in new media forms, where usage has been on the rise over the same time frame.

With the diffusion of the internet in Japan, especially among the youth, many Japanese now have the tools to disseminate information very easily to a large population, without requiring the payment of any fees, simply by posting information on a website or through social media. 82.8% (100.44 million) of the Japanese population is now online and the number is over 90% for those who are

between the ages of thirteen to forty-nine years old. Internet information is not edited like traditional media and it is not tightly controlled in Japan. Due to the lack of tight control of information, a flood of irrelevant but new information is available daily on websites and social media. The credibility of information found on the internet is difficult to verify, especially if the information source is claiming to be someone or some organization falsely. Verifying the truth of sources is difficult and challenging. Still, taking these dangers into consideration, for the most part, a huge amount and variety of valuable information is available on the internet and is very easily accessed. This information is also shared on social media such as social networking sites and mini-blogs. Such communication activities on social media can quickly popularize certain topics and is convenient to use in certain instances.

Social media allows communication in ways that were not possible before. One example is the micro-blog Twitter where people can continuously know what each account holder is thinking in real time, even if the users have never met in real life. Social networking sites such as Facebook allow people to manage their personal connections much easier than before. YouTube allows digital videos to be shared with others living far away through a network connection. These interpersonal links are not all powerfully committed personal links, but rather weaker links that allow for the existence of a connection without requiring a strong commitment among people using social media. Social media shortens distances between people efficiently and effectively connects people in modern society.

During and after the Great East Japan Earthquake, even in the areas that had relatively minor damage, life and communications were disrupted. In Ibaraki, during such failure of lifelines due to severe natural disaster, voice communication via normal telecommunication channels was difficult, but internet access via mobile devices was relatively robust and resilient in comparison. VoIP (Voice over IP), SMS and email were ad hoc solutions for communication and overcoming telecommunication breakdowns during this disaster. In the midst of this disaster, many Japanese discovered that social media via internet was effective in disseminating information. For example, SNSs like Facebook were convenient for efficiently communicating with friends and family, and micro-blogs like Twitter could widely disseminate information in short text messages.

The fact that 42.4% of access to the internet is by smartphone in Japan means that Japan has a very large mobile internet population. Among the many uses of the internet social media accounts for 44%. This combination means that many Japanese are more interconnected and now have many communication channels and information sources. In such an environment, the Japanese have the capability to design social systems with better communication. During and following the turmoil of 3.11 many possibilities for new media forms were experimented and are showing promise in new ways of communication.

Through my research in local communities (Kaigo 2012), such as Tsukuba in Ibaraki, I have found that Twitter played a significant role in disseminating vital information to local citizens during the disaster of March 2011. Social capital could be formed, in great part, through such interaction with social media.

Japanese municipalities, as Tsukuba for example, are currently using SNSs such as Facebook to enhance civil society and are investigating how SNSs can provide vital information in connecting citizens, governments and civil society. Facebook was used as a tool to mobilize and disseminate information, as disaster relief during the May 2012 tornado in Tsukuba (Kaigo and Tkach-Kawasaki 2015). The Facebook page named “The Tsukuba Civic Activities Cyber-Square” currently has over 2,500 followers including various civil society organizations and individuals that are oriented towards civic activities. It is the pioneer and model case of civil society oriented Facebook pages managed by local governments in Japan. I have also explored how the various functions of government elevate civil society Facebook page metrics and how latent dysfunctions of government operations inadvertently depress the page metrics. From 2012 through 2013 I have analyzed the results of two field experiments to promote this online community page and conducted interviews among local government workers involved in the online community management of the page. I have been able to determine that the different stages of growth can be attributed to a blend of periodic social gatherings and paid advertisements. Social gatherings were found to be more beneficial for ‘engagement’ that affected the initial and continuous growth and promotion of online engagement in the early and later stages of this community (Kaigo and Okura 2015).

In conclusion, I have found strong evidence that building local online communities from existing offline civil society organizations and civic-minded citizens is feasible in Japan, but more research is necessary to determine the best formula for combining tactics to create such online communities that are oriented towards building a better civil society.

References

- KAIGO Muneo (2012). Social Media Usage During Disasters and Social Capital: Twitter and the Great East Japan Earthquake. *Keio Communication Review*, No. 34.
- KAIGO Muneo and TKACH-KAWASAKI Leslie (2015). Social Media for Enhancing Civil Society and Disaster Relief: Facebook Usage by Local Municipalities in Japan, *JeDEM*, Vol. 7, No. 1.
- KAIGO Muneo and OKURA Sae (2015). Exploring Fluctuations in Citizen Engagement on a Local Government Facebook Page in Japan. *Telematics and Informatics*, 2015 (in press). <[dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2015.07.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2015.07.011)>.