Keitai, Blog, and *Kuuki*-wo-yomu (Read the atmosphere): Communicative Ecology in Japanese Society

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In mobile communications studies, Japan is known for its "keitai culture." However, the actual use of keitai among the Japanese is anything but glamorous. On the other hand, strong preference of online diary and diary blogs among the Japanese is remarkable. What is puzzling, however, is that the Japanese online diarists and bloggers have been astoundingly self-effacing. What communications are they engaged in, with providing little information about themselves? Relying on and advancing the methodological perspective of "communicative ecology," this study discusses the way online diaries and blogs are intertwined with mobile communications, embedded in the communicative ecology. It also reveals the way "kuuki wo yomu" (read the atmosphere) motivates people's expectations and actions in social communications, contributing to the formation of the communicative ecology.

Japanese society and *keitai* culture

Japan is one of the most advanced information societies. In terms of social diffusion of ICTs, the commercialization and social diffusion of advanced ICTs, such as FTTH and 3G mobile phones, has been astounding in Japan along with Korea, compared with other industrialized societies, in the latter half of the 2000s. Particularly, Japanese society is known for its "*keitai culture*" in mobile communications studies. As is well known, it was NTT DoCoMo that was the world's first mobile carrier to set out the commercial services of 2.5G and 3G. "I-mode," 2.5G internet-enabled mobile service, started in February 1999 and FOMA, 3G service,[1] was launched in October 2001. Since then, a great variety of advanced features has been developed and commercialized in Japanese market. Color displays and polyphonic ring tones were commercialized in late 1999. Music player functionality debuted on the market in 2000, and camera-embedded handsets, along with picture mailing services in late 2000. In early 2001, handsets capable of downloading java applets were introduced, enabling applications to run on the handset without further downloads. The infrared communication function in 2002; an application for reading QR Code, a two-dimensional bar code, which can store URLs and other character information and enables users to obtain such information by means of a mobile phone's camera, was implemented in 2003; handsets equipped with a contactless IC-chip that acts as electronic money, electronic tickets, debit cards, credit cards, and so on in 2004; a song-downloading function in 2004; a GPS function in 2006; and a one-segment terrestrial digital TV broadcasting service for mobile devices[2] in 2007.

In addition, Japanese love of text messaging is an integral part of *keitai* culture, 'one of the

[1] FOMA, Freedom Of Mobile multimedia Access, is the brand name of 3G mobile telecommunications service developed and provided by NTT DoCoMo.
[2] This service is called "One-Seg" because the bandwidth of the single channel (6 MHz) allocated to each broadcaster is divided into 13 segments, and one of those segments is used for mobile devices.

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distinctive features of Japanese youths' *keitai* use' (Okada 2005: 49). Especially, the way to make text messaging is intriguing. The Japanese characters are composed of four distinct systems: *Hiragana*, *Katakana*, Chinese characters, in addition to the alphanumeric system. Thus mobile communications carriers developed a system in which a specific combination of two-digit numbers corresponds to a specific Japanese phonetic symbol. For example, the combination of 2 and 1 indicates *ka*; 3 and 4 means *se*, and so forth. Then, *kana-kanji* conversion was also developed and implemented. Thus, when sending messages, Japanese users have to manipulate this code-specific system and the system of two-digit number combinations. Furthermore, Japanese mobile phones are equipped with special characters or symbols like cm (centimeter), arrows, musical notes, astrological symbols and so forth. People have to switch different modes of characters and symbols pushing specific buttons. However, Japanese youth rapidly mastered these protocols, developing skillful fingertip manipulation in order to push the buttons of mobile handsets with amazing dexterity. Such dexterous manipulation of mobile handsets is called "*oyayubi* literacy," "thumb literacy," and some young Japanese are called "*oyayubi zoku*," or the "thumb group" in *keitai* culture.

Furthermore, young Japanese are innovative in that they manipulate sets of characters and symbols to make up literally thousands of emoticons that convey subtle nuances of their feeling and they utilize special symbols to refer to anything but their original meanings. For example, a variety of emoticons to convey subtle feelings have been devised, such as (-_-;) and (-_-*) to refer to embarrassed feeling, m(_ _)m to mean sincere apology and the like. For another, some come to use the astrological symbol for Libra (♎) to refer to puffed rice cake (*mochi*) and the new year's day, because the symbol resembles a piece of puffed rice cake (*mochi*) and *mochi* is usually eaten on the new year's day.

Such dexterous use of text messaging on the mobile phone dates back to the time numeric pagers began to be used among the young in the mid 1990s. The deregulation of telecommunications market and harsh competition lowered the cost of pagers then and the Japanese youth began to use numeric messages to communicate everything from greetings to everyday emotions. Most were based on various ways numbers could be read in Japanese, such as 4-6-4-9, which is pronounced as yo-ro-shi-ku, "hello," "best regards," 3-3-4-1, pronounced as sa-mi-shi-i, "I feel lonely," and so on.

Therefore, Japanese scholars have paid careful attention to the use of mobile devices among the Japanese, especially youth, since the mid 1990s. Text messaging is certainly a novel form of social communication. It allows people to perform the asynchronous yet instantaneous exchange of messages, freeing them of location and time on either side of the exchange. Japanese scholars have investigated the way text messaging facilitates new norms and network formations of interpersonal relationship and group activities among people, especially the young and they claim the rather uniqueness in Japanese use of mobile communications devices. For example, Mizuko Ito points out its distinctiveness as follows.

> In contrast to the cellular phone of the United States (defined by technical infrastructure), and the mobile of the United Kingdom (defined by the unfettering from fixed location) (Kotamraju and Wakeford 2002), the Japanese term *keitai* (roughly translated, "something you carry with you") references a somewhat different set of dimensions. A *keitai* is not so much about a new technical capability or freedom of motion but about a snug and intimate

> technosocial tethering, a personal device supporting communications that are a constant, lightweight, and mundane presence in everyday life. [Ito 2005: 1]

In other words, Japanese society can be regarded as one of the pioneering societies in the development of "Smart Mobs." In fact, Rheingold begins his seminal book "Smart Mobs" with reference to Tokyo and Shibuya Crossing:

> The first signs of the next shift began to reveal themselves to me on a spring afternoon in the year 2000. That was when I began to notice people on the streets of Tokyo staring at their mobile phones instead of talking to them. … Since then the practice of exchanging short text messages via mobile telephones has led to the eruption of subcultures in Europe and Asia. At least one government has fallen, in part because of the way people used text messaging. Adolescent mating rituals, political activism, and corporate management styles have muted in unexpected ways. … My media moment at Shibuya Crossing was only my first encounter with a phenomenon I've come to call "smart mobs." [Rheingold 2001:xi]

SLUGGISH JAPANESE SMART MOBS: LIMITED USE DESPITE WIDE AVAILABILITY OF ADVANCED FEATURES

Certainly, advanced 3G mobile network, the incessantly introduced novel features of the mobile handset, the dexterity of users, *keitai* groups, and the changes in interpersonal relations that *keitai* has brought about may well be dazzling and call for detailed research. However, as mobile communications have become a large part of people's lives across many societies during the 2000s,and in the current context, the way the Japanese use mobile phones has turned out to be anything but glamorous.

In most societies, text messaging has played a critical role in widespread use of mobile communications. "There has been much fascination in studying, cataloguing, and debating the varieties and intricacies of text messaging, and how it has modified social, media, and cultural practices" (Goggin 2006: 66). Castells and others argue that text messaging could challenge existing social norms in public spaces and traditional power structures in families, schools, friendship networks, and workplaces (Castells et al. 2006).

Certainly, in the Philippines in 2001, a large number of people gathered to protest the corruption of President Joseph Estrada at the EDSA Shrine, where Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown by People Power Revolution in February 1986. The protesters were emergently self-organized via text messaging and their number was growing rapidly, forcing Estrada to be removed from office. Obama used a combination of SMS text messaging, mobile Web site, interactive voice response, mobile video and mobile banner ads to reach out to a great number of voters in his presidential campaign.

However, there are no such social movements among the Japanese Smart Mobs. Even though mobile internet enabled handsets equipped with a great variety of advanced features are spread widely in Japanese society, *keitai* is predominantly used for leisure or practical purposes particularly while commuting such as, public transportation timetables and accident reports. *Keitai* use for social communications is significantly limited.

OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES ALONG "THE WAY"

According to the national survey conducted in January 2010[3] by World Internet Project Japan, which I have been engaged in as a project member[4], 55% of *keitai* users take pictures more than once a month. 53% have ever used ringtones or ringsongs, 30% games, 25% one-segment terrestrial digital TV broadcasting service. 56% have ever used weather forecasts, 32% transit information of public transportation. Whereas business wants to stimulate the use of advanced features and contents, few have caught on. The use of transaction services such as mobile banking, e-learning services or political engagement is almost none. So ARPU (average revenue per user) reached its peak in 2002 and has been declining gradually since then in Japanese *keitai* market.

When it comes to the use for social communications, 16% of *keitai* users access social networking sites via the mobile phone more than once a month. Most are in their teens and twenties. 45% of teenagers answered they used social networking sites via the mobile phone, 43% in the twenties, 15% in the thirties and almost none in the forties and above. What is astounding here is that the Japanese are remarkably self-effacing on social networking sites, which will be explored later in detail. They rarely put their real name, e-mail address, or portrait there. That is, social communications via social networking sites are primarily among those already acquainted with each other. Those who use social networking sites to expand their social network are considerably few. Based on the field researches and social surveys I have been engaged in, only 10% of the Japanese who use social networking sites have the experience to know anyone via online and to come into contact with each other, compared with 40 to 50 percent of the Koreans and the Finns in the latter half of the 2000s.

This observation is true to the use of text messaging on the mobile phone. Among the Japanese, SMS is used exclusively among family members; due to the early adoption and widespread of 2.5G network like i-mode, the Japanese users of the mobile phone send and receive Internet e-mails as a default means of text messaging. When I conducted a research on college students in Tokyo, Seoul and Helsinki along with household study in these three cities in 2002 and 2003, the average number of e-mails the Japanese college students sent a week reached 60 (that of the Koreans also reached 60 while that of the Finnish was 17). In an ethnographic research project I conducted in Japan from 2007 to 2009, which will be discussed later, 45 people from teenagers to seventy year olds participated (2 high school students, 28 college students, and 5 each of those in their thirties, forties and aged 50 years old). I asked them to document their use of various ICTs and mass media for four days and made interviews three times for each participant. The simple average number of text messages sent via the mobile phone among those 45 participants was 7.5 per day, and that received was 10.4 per day. Almost all of the e-mails via the mobile phone were either exchanged between those already acquainted or

[3] The sample of the survey is 525 Japanese nationwide, aged 15 to 69. Geographically segmented random sampling and direct-visit and self-completion questionnaire was used. The survey was funded by ICF, International Communications Foundation, and ICR, InfoCom Research Inc.

[4] WIP, World Internet Project, was founded by the USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future (formerly the UCLA Center for Communication Policy) in the United States in 1999. As of 2008, WIP has more than 20 partners in countries and regions all over the world, including Singapore, Italy, China, Japan, Macao, South Korea, Sweden, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, Hungary, Canada, Chile, Argentina, Portugal, Australia, Bolivia, Iran, and the Czech Republic. Some Japanese scholars started to participate in the project and formed the World Internet Project Japan (JWIP) in April, 2000. I joined JWIP in 2008. http://www.worldinternetproject.net/.

junk mail. They were afraid of any message from strangers. Therefore, as far as social communications over the mobile phone are concerned, they tend to enclose their online communications within those already acquainted. Thus, Japanese Smart Mobs have never generated such social movements as the one in the Philippines or in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign.

Moreover, what is particular about social communications among the Japanese is that people avoid synchronous voice communications via the mobile phone or fixed landlines. Whereas 95% of Korean and Finnish college students said they make voice communication via the mobile phone at least once a day, so did only 55% of Japanese college students in my comparative research in 2002. According to the ethnographic research mentioned above, the simple average number of outgoing voice calls via the mobile phone was 0.7 per day and that of incoming voice calls was 0.9 per day. Those with whom the participants make frequent voice communications are limited to only three or four persons, i.e., their family members and very close friends, usually significant others. In other cases, they make voice calls for business reason. Even between friends few voice calls either via the mobile phone or via the fixed land line are made. Many young Japanese said that they would first send a text message to ask friends for permission before making a phone call.

COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGY APPROACH AND CEP, CYBER ETHNOGRAPHY PROJECT

Keitai studies mainly highlight the expansive and innovative use of *keitai* and interpersonal relations brought about by *keitai*, while putting emphasis on the divergence from the past. I believe we need such an approach since ICTs and their use, purposes and efficacies are not something that we can take for granted or which definition and manner of use we are born knowing. It is necessary to probe incessant changes of people's behaviors and attitudes, social communications and relationship and their meaning in socio-cultural contexts in accordance with the development of ICTs.

At the same time, I would like to contend that what is discussed in the previous section tells us that we need a different approach as well. That is, it is necessary to situate *keitai* in a broader "communicative ecology" in order to understand the communications the Japanese engage in.

"Communicative ecology" is the concept Miller and Slater (2000) proposed. They claim that "as a methodological approach, [communicative ecology] is concerned to assemble the full range of (symbolic and material) communicative resources, and the (social and technical) networks into which they are organized, in order to identify communicative structures, constraints and potentials" (Slater 2005:1). This approach defines ICTs broadly to include not only new mobile and digital media, but also analogue media and offline social communications, and puts the focus on their interrelation and social contexts of use.

Theoretically, the approach prevents us from assuming the simple disruption of innovative ICTs from the past. Certainly, successive innovations in ICTs represent major social events, which require people to figure out how to deal with the changes. The way people engage in social communications and form social relations can be quite different from those of the past. However, people may well rely

on culture to make sense of ICTs as they figure out, how innovations can be used, and what benefits and risks they will bring to each individual and society at large. When technological diffusion takes place, the more novel and innovative the technology, the greater the social necessity for culture to work to understand what that technology is and what is going on with its development and diffusion.

Culture in this case is considered as a large set of representations, or tools of thought. They have various generative capacities that help to structure or frame people's experiences. Such representations enable the members of each culture to make something new comprehensible by means of operating existing representations metaphorically, to motivate people to behave in a certain way by providing meaning for the behavior or goals for action, to recognize deviant cases, to anticipate what will come next, and so on. Though culture must be shared intersubjectively by a cultural group, the extent to which each representation is shared in terms of coverage, depth, strength and persistence varies considerably. Therefore, most representations should be of a vast array of intracultural variations as Sperber (1985) suggests in the argument of the epidemiology of representations.

Then, it is ethnography that plays the most significant role in investigating such representations associated with ICTs being embedded in social activities, constituting a social environment. In their seminal dialogue, Newhagen and Rafaeli (1995) argued that "defining the Internet is largely a function of the constraints we name when we conceptualize it." In a similar vein, Christine Hine raised the issue of the Internet as cultural artifacts in her stimulating work (Hine 2000, 2008). Contexts and meanings of Internet use are too abundant to fix or anchor; even if fixed once, they always escape from existing understandings, developing into others. Thus, quantitative methodologies can hardly capture the emergent properties of such contexts and meanings, whereas ethnography works to find out and fix, if temporal, objects of cyberspace, people's perceptions and conducts relevant to study. Group interviewing, diary studies and other forms of ethnographic research to collect people's perceptions, feelings, experiences, thinking, categorizations, expectations, reflections and (mis)understandings in their use of various ICTs are essential to discover and refine "objects" and significant cultural representations.

Based on such a methodological and theoretical orientation, I have been engaged in developing an ethnographic research project to explore the communicative ecology of Japanese society since 2007, which I call Cyber Ethnographic Project, CEP. The objective of the project can be formulated as exploring a complexity of communicative ecology among the Japanese, while searching for representations powerful enough to contribute to developing the communicative ecology. CEP owes much to my collaboration with researchers of both academics and industry.

As mentioned before briefly, 45 people participated in CEP. I asked them to document their records at least for four days. The records include access to web sites via PC and that via the mobile phone, e-mails they receive and send via PC and those via the mobile phone, out-going and in-coming voice phone calls of the fixed land line and those via the mobile phone, watching TV, listening to radio and music, reading magazines, where they were, and whom they got in touch both online and offline. Out of 45, 31 participants used a social networking site. They were asked about their friends and how they got in touch with them through different communication channels. I met with each participant three times and asked them, what feelings and thoughts they had when they accessed specific sites and

interacted with people for each occasion. As a result of this research design, it is possible to identify with whom they got in touch, through which communication channel, and with what thought or feeling. Furthermore, in order to find out the relative position of the participants among the Japanese, a survey questionnaire was prepared. All participants answered it and the questionnaire has been incorporated into several national surveys and surveys on college students I have been engaged in.

CEP has grown out of my previous research activities. Most relevant is the comparative study of Tokyo, Seoul and Helsinki, which was mentioned briefly before. Since it compares Japanese society with Finnish and Korean ones, I call it JFK study. The JFK study is a series of qualitative and quantitative research projects conducted through the collaborative efforts of Japanese, Korean and Finnish researchers from 2002 through 2007.[5] Even though Japan, Korea and Finland are all "advanced information societies," comparable to the United States, considerable differences in various ICTs' diffusion and use were observed, which made me aware of the necessity to investigate the "plurality of information societies" (Castells ed. 2005) and to pay careful attention to socio-cultural contextualization of ICTs. For such an investigation, a comprehensive and aggregative analysis of fine grain based on a wide variety of empirical studies in different societies is vital. This recognition led me to develop CEP.

CEP along with JFK study suggests that online diaries and blogs are intertwined with mobile communications, embedded in the communicative ecology. It also reveals the way "*kuuki wo yomu*" (read the atmosphere) motivates people's expectations and actions in social communications, contributing to the formation of the communicative ecology. I would like to explain these points in the rest of the article.

STRONG ATTITUDE OF CAUTION TOWARD CYBERSPACE, AND DOMINANCE OF ANONYMITY

As we have seen, Japanese Smart Mobs make little use of advanced features of *keitai* and they engage in social communications with those already acquainted with each other. The same is exactly true of the way the Japanese use PC-base Internet[6]. Japanese society enjoys the fastest broadband

[5] In JFK study, different methodologies, i.e., social surveys, household study, group interviewing, in-depth interviewing, diary study, have been deployed. For example, a household study was carried out in 2002 to 2003. 15 households and 43 members in Tokyo, 9 households and 28 members in Seoul and 9 households and 23 members in Helsinki participated. They were asked to keep record of the use of the Internet and the mobile phone on two days and an in-depth interviewing was made once for each household, not all the members who kept their records. Social surveys were conducted twice. The one was conducted on college students in 2002. The sample was 487 students in Tokyo, 490 students in Seoul, and 315 students in Helsinki. The other was on 455 inhabitants in Tokyo 23 special wards, aged 20 to 69, 1013 inhabitants in Seoul 25 special wards, aged 20 to 69 and 1307 inhabitants in Finland, aged 15 to 29. The survey in Tokyo and Seoul was conducted in November to December 2005 and that in Helsinki was in May to July 2007.

[6] In this article, a PC includes a mac and PC-based Internet means any internet connections using a PC or a mac via either a wired or a wireless connection. In contrast, mobile internet refers to the Internet connection via the mobile phone handsets alone.

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Internet connection at the lowest cost and the highest diffusion of FTTH among broadband subscribers. Many advanced services are invented and put in commercial use. However, the actual use is not so diversified or active as in other societies. Mikami, the leader of WIP Japan, conducted a principal component analysis of the social differences in online activities and services in Japan and twelve other countries where WIP surveys were conducted in 2007, i.e., Australia, Canada, China, Colombia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Israel, Macao, New Zealand, Singapore, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the United States (Mikami 2009). Eighteen items of online activities and services, which are classified into five categories,[7] are selected and their use rate for each society among Internet users is put into principal component analysis. The result shows that Japan is the most inactive in online activities or use along with Colombia.

CEP and other studies consistently prove that the Japanese use the most advanced and sophisticated ICT environment mostly for seeking information for consumption, for watching videos and downloading music for fun, for peeping into BBSs dominated by anonymity, and for making social communications with those already acquainted. The Internet is rarely used for social participation, political engagement, accessing to online government, online transactions, online learning, telemedicine, self-expression, or expanding social networks. Just as the use of voice phone call is remarkably limited, so are synchronous communications such as Skype, instant messaging and online chatting via PC-based Internet among the Japanese.

What has struck me the most about the way ICT is used in Japan is the strong apprehension towards cyberspace at large. A large number of participants are afraid that others will come to know the web sites one has seen and what one writes in e-mail messages, that one's passwords necessary for various Internet uses will be stolen and abused, and that one is likely to be slandered on the Internet.

Along with such a cautious attitude toward the Internet as a social communication medium is a strong concern with online encounters and recognition of the Internet as an anonymous communication space. Korean people involved in cyberspace use their real names. Social networks in the real world and in cyberspace overlap and reinforce one another and cyberspace functions as a means of communication and social activity. As is widely known, the reigning service in Korean internet use is the "community site." Community sites such as "daum" (www.daum.net) and "cyworld" (www.cyworld.com) have more than 10 million registered users and millions of communities. People are expected to disclose themselves and use their real names (see also Kim 2004).

In contrast, among the Japanese, cyberspace is dominated by the notion of "anonymity"; people tend to avoid being involved in social communication over the Internet. When they engage in social communications on BBSs, blogs or social networking sites, they prefer to be anonymous and they do

[7] The 18 items are e-mail, instant messaging, and chat for the category of communication services, looking for news, travel information, looking for jobs or work, and health information for the category of information services, online games, downloading or listening to music, downloading or watching videos, and sexual content for the category of online activities for fun, purchasing, paying bills, travel reservations or bookings, and online banking for the category of e-commerce and transaction services, and looking up the definition of a word, finding or checking a fact, and distance learning for the category of online learning activities.

not disclose much about themselves, which will be discussed further in the next section. Therefore, even among the Japanese who use online communications, the dynamics between social interaction in cyberspace and that in the offline lived-in world are inclined to be lacking and online world and offline world are divided from each other despite wide availability of advanced technologies. For example, as to the offline meetings of community sites, almost all community sites held offline meetings in Korea; in Finland, one half, and in Japan, a third. Furthermore, the Japanese are the least likely to participate in offline meetings. I have asked whether there was any person whom the participants or the respondents of a survey get to know online. The result is consistent: while around half of the Korean and the Finnish have at least one person whom they have gotten to know online and come into contact with via e-mail or telephone, only one out of six to ten Japanese have such a person.

In terms of the dominance of anonymity in cyberspace among the Japanese, anonymous edits of articles in Wikipedia are telling. An edit of an article in Wikipedia can be made either with the name of the registered account or anonymously; in the case of the latter, the IP address from which the anonymous edit is made is recorded and shown on the article and its edit history. I collected the data from Wikipedia sites of several different languages with substantial numbers of users. It turns out that Japanese Wikipedia is outstanding in that the number of anonymous edits is almost half of the total edits. This is even more astounding because even English Wikipedia, where the most heterogeneous population is likely to gather and vandalism reigns over a great number of contentious and divisive articles, only 30 % of total edits are anonymous. In other populous language versions, the rate of anonymous edits is from 10% to 20% mostly.

SELF-EXPRESSION WITH STRONG SELF-EFFACEMENT ON PERSONAL HOMEPAGES, BLOGOSPHERES AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

In spite of the limited use of the Internet as a communications tool, there is a medium the Japanese make considerable use of when compared to the Koreans and the Finns. That is online diary and diary blog. In JFK study in 2002, in order to examine the use of personal homepages as a self-expression and social communication medium, we asked the respondents of the JFK study whether they had their own homepage and what kind of information they had on it. The percentage of those with their own homepage was 10.1% in Japan, 13.3% in Finland and 25.3% in Korea. Clearly, the Japanese were the least active. Two findings made us curious. The one was that the Japanese students surveyed are astoundingly self-effacing. They did not put their real name, e-mail address, portrait, telephone number, or family on their homepages. The other was that there was one item the Japanese who possessed their own homepage made more use than the Koreans and the Finns: diary. Based on the results of different surveys conducted in the early half of the 2000s, more than half of Japanese homepage owners said they had diary on their homepage (less than one-third of Korean owners and a tenth of Finnish owners had diary), even though the number of homepage owners in Japanese society was limited (around one out of ten internet users).

In fact, such a strong presence of online diaries or online journals on personal homepages among the Japanese has drawn much attention from certain Japanese social psychologists interested in CMC. For example, Kawaura, Kawakami, and Yamashita, pioneering scholars in this line of research,

conducted a rather comprehensive survey on online diarists in Japanese as early as 1997 (Kawaura ed. 1998), well before Philippe Lejeune's "Cher Ecran ...: Journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet" (Lejeune 2000), which is regarded as the groundbreaking and profoundly influential work on online diaries. According to Kawaura and other prominent scholars in this field, online diaries in Japanese began to appear on the Web in 1995 at the latest. A website containing a collection of links to online diaries, "Tsuda *Nikki* (diary) links," named after the creator of the site, was made in May 1995. On another collection site, Japanese Open Yellowpage (http://joyjoy.com), approximately 17,000 homepages were registered as of October 1997.

Compared with cyberspace in English (mostly attributable to the United States), the emergence of online diaries in cyberspace in Japanese was no later nor less extensive than that of those in English. Many researchers on online diaries in English agree that they began to appear on the Web in or around 1995 (e.g., Karlsson 2006). At this time, the Internet and the Web began to prevail in society at large and the number of Internet users had begun to grow.

However, online diarists were still rare among Internet users, still less among the population at large. It required a certain amount of knowledge of HTML and technical skills of web servers to set up and develop a personal homepage in the late 1990s, even though homepage hosting services became available widely. It was weblogs or blogs that finally make online diaries widespread and an active research object in the 2000s. Blog hosting services enable authors to post text, images, and links to various web pages, including other blogs, easily on their blog entries, which are posted with the date stamped in reverse chronological order, and readers to leave comments in an interactive format. Such features facilitate a much larger, less technically literate population to produce online diaries easily.

The growth of the blogosphere in the middle of the 2000s was tremendous. What is most significant here is that the expansion has owed as much to Japanese as to English. According to Technorati, in terms of blog posts by language, Japanese numbered at the top spot, with 37% of the total posts as of the fourth quarter of 2006. English occupied the second with 36%, followed by Chinese at 8% and Italian at 3% (Sifry 2007). Thus, Japanese and English dominate the blogosphere; given the number of speakers of different languages worldwide, this share of Japanese in the blogosphere is outstanding.

However, a significant difference is found when it comes to anonymity. The blogger callback survey of the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported that 55% of the bloggers surveyed said they blogged under a pseudonym or made-up name, while 43% said they blogged using their real name (Lenhart and Fox 2006). On the contrary, according to the web survey conducted by Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japanese government, 31% of the bloggers surveyed said they blogged under anonymity, 59% under a pseudonym or screen name, and 6% under a pseudonym or screen name suggestive of their real name, while those bloggers using their real name was only 2% (MIC 2009). In CEP, the strong self-effacement of the Japanese in blogging is again obvious. Five out of 24 participants possessed their own blogs and no one put their real name, portrait or e-mail address.

The same applies to the use of social networking sites. In fact, for most Japanese internet users, the distinction between social networking sites and blogs as a social communication media has been

blurred. One need make registration to get full access to social networking sites and one usually has privacy controls that allow the member to choose who can view the member's profile or contact the member. Blogs need no registration and have no privacy controls. However, for most Japanese, the main function of social network sites and blogs to write and to read is diary. As mentioned before, 31 out of 45 participants in CEP get access to a social networking site and all keep their diary. Furthermore, what they did in getting access to social networking site was almost nothing but writing diary and reading diary of friends.

In addition, people on social networking sites are as much self-effacing as bloggers. Only two of 31 participants use their real name and none put their portrait. As to blogs, some Japanese write filter blogs with their real names or nicknames and artists, entertainers, politicians and others write blogs for publicity. However, most ordinary Japanese bloggers keep diary without disclosing their identity. Five participants who possessed their blogs were no exception.

Based on the national social survey on the Japanese in January 2010, 13% of PC-based Internet users and 16% of mobile internet users get access to social networking sites more than once a month and 32% of PC-based Internet users 19% of mobile internet users read blogs more than once a month. What communications, then, are the Japanese who have homepages or blogs or access social networking sites engaged in? Such individuals are more active in communication activities on the Internet, and keep diaries on the web, even though they provide little information about themselves.

"*KUUKI WO YOMU*," AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGY IN JAPANESE SOCIETY

As was mentioned, the CEP aims to explore complexity of communicative ecology among the Japanese, while searching for representations or tools of thought powerful enough to contribute to developing the communicative ecology. Over the course of the CEP, a term has been mentioned frequently by most participants to explain their feeling and emotions while making social communications: that is, "*kuuki wo yomu*" (to read the atmosphere).

The word "*kuuki*" literally means "air" and metaphorically refers to the "atmosphere or mood in a certain situation". The word "*yomu*" literally means "to read." "*Kuuki wo yomu*" thus means reading the mood or understanding what is going on in a given situation, and then knowing what to say and how to behave in the situation. Most participants express feeling obliged to "*kuuki wo yomu*" in social communications. In other words, they fear being labeled as "*kuuki wo yome-nai*" (cannot read the air; clueless) and ruining the atmosphere.

For example, when asked why they did not engage in voice communication with friends, the participants referred to a strong apprehension that they did not know the other's surrounding circumstances when calling and would therefore run the risk of being called "KY," an initialism for "*kuuki wo yome-nai*." Some even showed their concern about being called KY when sending a text message via the mobile phone to friends. They felt that a text message via the mobile phone obliged its recipient to answer the message as soon as possible. Thus, they did not want their friends to reply to a

message which might not be interesting to the friends. Actually, they talked about some occasions where they received a text message from their friends which was irrelevant to them and they felt at a loss as to how to reply.

As such examples suggest, "*kuuki wo yomu*" or avoidance of "KY" functions as one of the most powerful cultural representations in social communications in Japan. Japanese constantly feel pressure to attune to the predominating "*kuuki.*" In order to engage in social communications in a proper manner, they try to detect what *kuuki* they are in and then what to say and how to behave in the *kuuki*. In other words, they require some preexisting *kuuki* in order to make conversation and act socially. Of course, *kuuki* is never a given fact; it is a subtle intersubjective atmosphere generated, constructed, and constantly changing through the incessant negotiation of people involved. A junior high school student wrote "It's really difficult to decide whether to accept a situation so that you don't disrupt the calm, or to stick to what you think is right even if you are called 'KY'" in a short essay on Yomiuri Newspaper, December 8, 2007.

Given the constant pressure of *kuuki wo yomu* in offline face-to-face conversation, online communications are far much harder for the Japanese. Cyberspace is never a unified space with a single *kuuki*. It is diversified and divided into an infinite number of sub-spaces, each of which emerges, transforms, and disappears without any fixed boundaries or members. And yet, the Japanese still need a preexisting *kuuki* to engage in social communications in a proper manner. Thus, it is no wonder that they are reluctant to get involved in online communications, resulting in a strong preference for anonymity and little self-disclosure among those who do get engaged.

As discussed, the Japanese tend to avoid synchronous communication, e.g., voice communications either over the phone or on the Internet. Synchronous online communications tend to lack a variety of cues and be extremely difficult to generate or detect the *kuuki*. In addition, synchronous communications require one to initiate contact while they rarely know the receiver's surrounding circumstances at the moment. Thus, synchronous communications may be intrusive to the other. If the one calls the other when the other is busy or does not welcome calling, the one would be regarded as "KY." It is understandable then that voice communications tend to be limited to family, partners, and very close friends, with whom participants have already developed and shared some *kuuki*.

What is interesting in this respect is the popularity of "quasi-synchronous wave" service I would like to call. That is "Nico Nico Douga."[8] Nico Nico Douga is a video sharing service where users upload, view and share video clips like YouTube. However, one distinctive feature of Nico Nico Douga is that comments are overlaid directly onto the video, and synchronized to a specific playback time as Figure 1. Comments from different users are put on a single video and encoded with the time information. Thus, when one watches the video alone, they can feel a sense of sharing the video simultaneously.

In Japan, Nico Nico Douga is as popular as YouTube. As of March 31, 2010, it has over

[8] http://www.nicovideo.jp/

16,700,000 registered users; over two million unique users access the site and watch an average of 37 minutes per day. It is no wonder that Nico Nico Douga has caught on in Japan. The kinds of comments welcomed are already established; that is, *kuuki* is already there. Users can add comments with little risk of being called KY and they can experience a lively wave of comments as if they are sharing the video with others simultaneously. Such a "quasi-synchronous wave" is likely preferred among Japanese, especially the young Japanese, who constantly feel pressure to attune to the predominating "*kuuki",* yet have a desire to engage in social communications.

FIGURE 1 Nico Nico Douga (a sample image made by the author based on the Nico Nico Douga video interface)."

Now, it is understandable that text messaging has become the default means of communicating with friends in Japan. Even with friends, the socio-psychological distance associated with voice communications feels too close for comfort; thus, many young Japanese will first send a text message to ask friends for permission before making a phone call. Without previous confirmation by means of text message, one runs the risk of being called "KY." Furthermore, sending a text message obliges its recipient to answer the message in some way or other. It is generally assumed that messages sent via the mobile phone will be seen by the receiver instantly or much faster than those sent via the PC-based Internet, which elevates the feeling of obligation to respond. Some participants of my research conveyed such feelings. In fact, even text messages are limited to friends; people expressed reluctance to send text messages to just acquaintances.

Given that text messaging via the mobile phone is the default means of interpersonal communication with even close friends, and that e-mails via the PC-based Internet are largely used for business and school work, how do such individuals carry out interpersonal communication with more distant friends or acquaintances?

It is the web diary, blogs and diary on social networking sites that play this role. That is, online diaries work as "detour" or peripatetic communication means with acquaintances. Japanese bloggers and uses of social networking sites record their daily happenings, everyday affairs, feelings, and

emotions in their life and workday. Since there is little self-disclosure, what they put on their site makes sense only to those who already know the individual and the web address of the person's blog or nickname on a social networking site in particular: their family, friends, and offline acquaintances. Such people will access their blogs or social networking sites occasionally so that, when they meet, they have shared things to talk about. There is little risk in being called "KY" when it comes to such detour communication. Therefore, one of the main functions with which web diaries provide Japanese is the means to maintain interpersonal relationships with psychologically more distant friends and acquaintances with whom the use of mobile text messages feels a bit too close and may border on "KY."

Of course, a number of Japanese internet users would like to get to know more people and engage in social communications with others in addition to offline acquaintances. On the other hand, they do not wish to disclose their personal information or offline identities. Thus, they upload information related to hobbies, interests, and entertainment in order to attract readers. Even though the creators and readers of these blogs or social networking sites seldom become acquainted online, let alone coming to meet and know one another offline, they expect other bloggers or other members of social networking sites who are interested in the same kind of information to visit their pages, thus leading to reciprocal visits, links and commentaries. They also hope that others will access to their pages via search engines with specific keywords. In fact, Japanese bloggers also use a variety of value-added functions to form some type of connection with others online and to monitor access to their blogs and a considerable number of them try measures to improve the visibility and traffic to their blog.

Thus, a subtle distinction as to categories for readers of blogs can be made between "particular Internet users of the same interest and hobbies" and "unspecified Internet users of the same interests and hobbies" in Japan. In fact, the MIC's survey made such a distinction, whereas the Pew's survey only distinguishes between "those whom they personally know" and "those whom they have never met" as types of blog audiences.

As discussed in this section, *kuuki wo yomu* or avoidance of KY, and its difficulty in online communications has the explanatory power to account for the characteristics of Internet use among the Japanese for which I have argued in this article: avoidance of synchronous communications, preference of anonymity, heavy use of mobile text messaging, and the widespread existence of blogs and online diaries.

The mobile phone, weblog, and the PC-based Internet as social communications media cannot exist independently; they are embedded in a communicative ecology. It is *kuuki wo yomu* or avoidance of KY, and the difficulty in conducting *kuuki wo yomu* in online communications that plays the fundamental role in developing the communicative ecology of Japanese society, whose structure is conceptualized in the Figure 2 below.

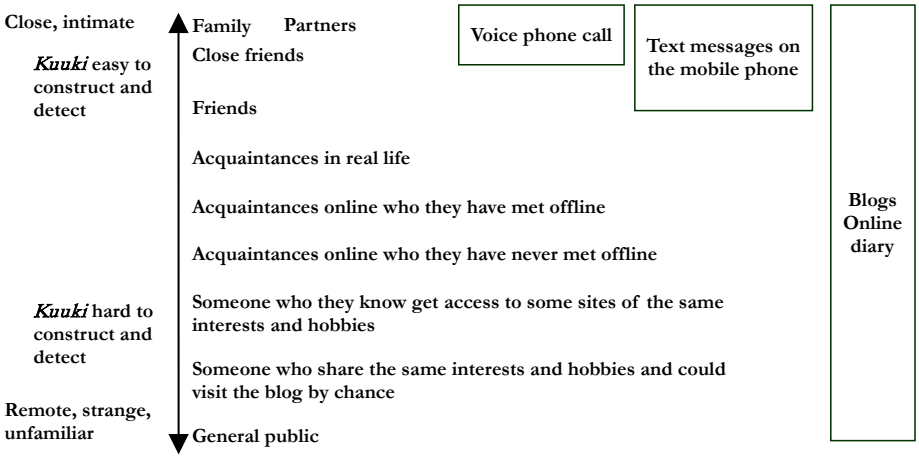

FIGURE 2 Structure of the communicative ecology of online communications media in Japanese society

The degree of ease for *kuuki wo yomu* in social communications varies according to the socio-psychological distance of the social relationship among the participants engaged in communication: the closer the relation, the easier it is to detect and construct *kuuki*. In addition, the different types of communications media have their own allowance for *kuuki wo yomu*. While synchronous voice communications requires high degree of *kuuki* shared among the participants, online communications of keeping and accessing online diaries and blogs can be made successfully with either low degree or high degree of *kuuki* shared. Therefore, the overall communicative ecology in Japanese society has been constituted through the dynamic interaction between types of communications media, social relationships involved and the degree of ease for *kuuki wo yomu*.

This article demonstrates, I hope, that it is essential to make our way deep into an intricate communicative ecology and emergent feeling, emotion and thought in getting access to the network in order to elaborate our understanding of dynamics of social communications. It is ethnography that provides us with the opportunity to explore a communicative ecology and to find out emergent objects of cyberspace, people's perceptions and conducts relevant to study.

And yet, there are significant challenges to develop the communicative ecological approach further. Among others, we need a close collaboration among researchers in academia and industry. The research need to cross different societies and to be conducted in a short period of time. The arguments of this article result from almost a decade of research of CEP and JFK study. Of course, JFK study is based on collaborative efforts of researchers in different societies and several researchers of both academics and industry have given substantive contributions to development of CEP. However, given incessant innovations and changes in ICTs, we need much intensive cooperation in a much shorter period of time. In this respect, the Japanese society must foster *kuuki* for collaboration between academics and industry in social science and humanities. We need to train researchers who are

capable of conducting ethnographic research focused on society and technology studies since the number of such researchers is still limited in Japan.

NOTES

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