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MOBILIZING DISCONTENT

Social media and networked activism in Japan

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The ways in which social media becomes recognized, legitimated, and used as an effective tool of political activity—framing, mobilizing, logistical organizing of offline events and the subsequent re-representation of these events to a wider audience—depends upon a number of contingent features that probably differ quite widely with time and place, media environment and social structure, cultural expectations and political context. In many cases, Japan included, social media is primarily used as a casual tool of social networking, a way for friends and families to stay in touch, a way for people to keep up with news and the flow of popular culture. This changed in Japan around the events associated with the disasters of March 2011. We describe this transformation through three key shifts which unfolded in chronological order from even before the tsunami reached shore, that moved from the instrumental to the constitutive and finally to the symbolic, communicative, and social functions that enabled political potential heretofore undeveloped. Our argument is that through the instrumental use of these technologies, users established connections and relatively enduring networks that then came to constitute a durable and effective post-3.11 politics.

A first shift that led to the realization of social media as more than a social networking tool was the use of social media to provide early and often exclusive information about the ongoing disaster and damage to property and life during the disaster. Social media was the first and primary way for most of us to experience the events, providing both up to date and visceral images of its unfolding. Often, this social media information was available when mainstream media was slower and less reliable, leading to a recognition of both the social and political potential of social media and the limitations, even intentional misrepresentations, of state-generated or mainstream-media broadcasts. Second, we see the role social media played in the identification of life-threatening needs and of the resources to fill those needs in ways that engaged a much wider public in the collective effort of response and relief. It was primarily through social media, and in particular, through the crowd-sourcing of first disaster and radiation information and the subsequent digital consolidation of this information into bulletin boards and databases, that need and resource were matched in timely and efficient ways. It was through social media that users fully contextualized the disaster as a political crisis and opportunity for wider, even democratic participation. It was also through social media that users fully contextualized the disaster as a political crisis and an opportunity for democratic participation in which their own efforts became important. Conversely, it was through these uses that social media were established as

powerful and legitimate tools of social engagement and transformation. These two shifts were essential to the ways that social media was subsequently used to politically reframe the disaster in ways that pointed to the venal choices made by capital to put profit over citizens safety, and the paltry efforts of the state to address these issues in ways that adhere to even the most rudimentary principles of social justice.

In our transition to the final section, we will suggest some implications of these new patterns of production, consumption, and general circulation of political information. What we call the “politicization of the everyday,” led directly to the renewed use of social media in the mobilization of what became the largest public demonstrations in Tokyo since the protests against the US-Japan Security Treaty (AMPO) in the 1960s. From the way that blogs and Facebook were used to frame issues and mobilize participants, to the role of Twitter microblogging in orchestrating public demonstrations, and of YouTube in disseminating these efforts to a global audience in visually arresting ways, we show how social media became the emblematic vehicles for many of the activities associated with traditional social movements and the generation of new sorts of activism.

Media environment

By 2011, Japan had one of the highest rates of penetration Internet use and Internet-ready mobile devices, most notably cell phones, in the world (Hashimoto 2011). According to a government white paper, the number of Internet users reached 94.62 million by the end of 2010, with an Internet penetration rate of 78.2 percent (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications [MIC] 2011), which means almost four in five Japanese use the Internet. Moreover, the ratio of mobile network devices is quite high: 96.3 percent of all Japanese households have mobile phones and 74.8 percent of the total Japanese population use them, whereas computers are limited to 66.2 percent of the population (with these figures varying by age and geography; MIC 2010). Thus, not only is the digital network already established, but the dispersal of technology into the direct control of a significant portion of the population was already a fact of everyday life when the earthquake hit. The patterns of use were also distinctive in 2011 Japan. While voice communication is dominant in many countries, in Japan it is far more common to communicate via text messaging (MIC 2011). Unlike voice, texts can be re-transmitted to other phones, a website or blog, and thus can be circulated far wider and faster. The fact that most Japanese users often move among different types of social media, such as texting, posting, blogging (MIC 2011), and have access to them almost every day (MIC 2010), means that the possible range of dissemination of any text message is exponentially expanded. That is, the technological potential of social media as an instrument of communication was already quite wide. With the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown, this already robust network—of both technologies and patterns of use—became redirected to new political uses, previously unimagined by most.

This media environment greatly influenced the way people in Japan responded to the crisis. In the minutes just after the earthquake, many cell phone transmitters went down, but the mobile texting and social media functions were able to continue in many places at a more regular rate. Users turned to social media to find loved ones and get vital information by necessity. Even the National Research Institute for Earth Science and Disaster Prevention and the Japan Meteorological Agency began tweeting early alerts that were widely re-circulated automatically by “bots” (automated posting scripts). According to a study on post-quake Twitter usage, the number of posts (tweets) on the day of the quake increased to 1.8 times the average, reaching 330 million tweets in total (NEC Biglobe 2011).

Other social networking sites such as Mixi saw unprecedented spikes in use (IT Media 2011). Individual users started to redistribute the alerts, providing the first, and for a long time, only, images and up to date information of the disaster, often in real-time through visual reports from their own phones. As the trains stopped in Tokyo, stranding millions, news of overnight shelters were quickly circulated on Twitter. We see a similar dispersal of media function through different forms, but in this case, all of them are digitally mediated. Microblogs and bulletin boards circulated information among strangers, while more commercial social networking platforms (Mixi and increasingly Facebook) were primarily used to confirm the safety of friends and relatives (Nikkei Business Publishing 2011). Other bulletin board sites that are usually devoted to entertainment information, such as 2channel, saw a shift into disaster-related posts (NEC Biglobe 2011). Within days of the earthquake and tsunami, 64 percent of blog links, 32 percent of Twitter news links, and the top twenty YouTube videos were all related to the crisis (Guskin 2011) and today, there are countless videos ranging from the picture of shaking buildings to the tsunami waves rushing in to the scattered remains after the waters receded.

There was also important changes in public perception, creating an understanding if not a consensus among users and the public that social media was important because it allowed for faster information-gathering than did the mass media. About one-third of those surveyed considered this necessary due to the lack of reliable information provided by the mass media and/or the government (Tomioka 2011). Many users explicitly framed their own use of social media as having a compensatory function—filling a gap left by the state and mass media. Second, we see the taking up of social media content by the mass media outlets, often with explicit recognition that a particular content was user-generated. The use of user-generated content is widespread in many American news programs, but was not as significant in the Japanese mainstream until 2011. This served to legitimate a technology and patterns of use that had heretofore mainly been limited to social chatting or entertainment. Now, social media was understood as an important tool in life and death activity, indeed in a national project of response and recovery. Technologies and users who were once dismissed as “amateur” and thus unreliable hobbyists, were suddenly seen as providing information that was “authentic,” in part because they were just ordinary people—just like the victims who happened to be on the spot, but also just like the viewers of mainstream media.

Making use of information networks: Instrumental to constitutive

This digital network enabled the first and most necessary political act, that of making connection, the basis of networks of communication, the foundation for association, and in time, mobilization. At this point, we can see the first practical realization of one of the primary characteristics of true social media—the many-to-many communication that does not pass through a single or unitary information manager. Of course, there are individuals who will “curate” their own sites, “uber-bloggers” with exceptional influence that shape the discourse on bulletin boards (Tsuda, 2012), and direct newsfeeds with many followers. But we also see increased instances of individuals looking to communicate directly with others in ways that legitimate the efficacy and agency of social media as a many-to-many mode of communication.

As we have argued elsewhere (Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand 2012), the role that social media played in the consolidation and redistribution of this user-generated information was also important, especially in ways that brought together the needs of the survivors and the available, if often unused or misused, resources. Survivors in trouble used texts and tweets to call out for help, or to alert others to those who needed help. But in the flood of messages, it was necessary to create some effective method of searching and linking. Twitter

tweets are commonly linked or recontextualized through the use of “hashtags” that associate information with certain keywords. For example, one early 3.11 hashtag was “#j_j_helpme” (cf. Kobayashi 2011; MIC 2011)—where the # marks the string as a hashtag, the first “j” is for Japan and the second one for “*jishin*,” meaning “earthquake” in Japanese. This was the primary method for providers, supporters or those with information of available resources to find messages of distress or identify needs. This practice began right away after the earthquake through user-generated activities in new or repurposed aggregation sites. Facebook and Mixi, the two most popular commercial social networking services, brought together new constellations of users around requests for specific information, while existing networks rallied around relief causes, and even strangers found and joined new groups in order to help. Meanwhile, special-purpose sites such as Google’s People Finder, used all over the world to locate disaster victims, or other sites that “mashup” posts for needs and resources, often through sophisticated mapping functions, allow for the same many-to-many mode of communication (cf. Potts 2014). Thus, we see even from the beginning that online communication led directly to offline action.

Mediations of post-disaster activism

In the wake of the 3.11 disaster, hundreds of thousands have joined anti-nuclear rallies across the country, resulting in some of the largest demonstrations postwar. While initially ignored by mass media, the protests soon captured the public imagination, prompting widespread endorsement, and declarations of a new era of citizen expressivity. The dominant mass media narrative surrounding this “age of demonstrations” (Karatani 2012) in the years since the 3.11 disaster, has been of spontaneous emergence: of youth, citizens or simply “ordinary people” finding new ways to express their discontent with political representation (cf. Oguma 2013). In ways similar to the wave of uprisings unfolding across the globe in the same period, social media quickly became an important symbol of this spontaneous coalescence. That is, from the so-called Arab Spring to the Indignados and Occupy movements, social media has become widely extolled as more than a mere organizational tool; hailed, often, as a universal catalyst for social change (Gerbaudo 2012).

These generalizations of spontaneous emergence inspired many to participate both online and offline, and as such should be taken seriously. But they also need to be unpacked in the context of local conditions. In this section, we argue that the successful mobilization of so many was also possible due to existing organizational skills and deployment of social capital through networks of dissent developed over the last decade, and even earlier. Interestingly, these networks were not directly those of a waning anti-nuclear movement (Broadbent 1999), nor always of the “invisible” connections forged between older cadres of the New Left (Ando 2013) but often by loosely organized assemblages of autonomous activists, diverse in terms of ideology and repertoire, but almost all firmly participating in social media discourse. In general, mobilization in the disaster aftermath unfolded in two parallel patterns: first, a concentrated series of repeating events, well-organized and with participants numbering in the tens, even hundreds of thousands, and second, a simultaneous profusion of often ad-hoc anti-nuclear protest events, spearheaded by individuals with very little or no experience with public protest. In the first case, social media like Twitter was often talked about as a transparent tool and venue for communicating and coordinating popular discontent and mistrust of government policy. It is in the latter case that we first see the symbol of Twitter emphasized as embodying not only the technology that makes such connection possible, but as a driver or catalyst of such affective connections themselves (cf. Shirky 2008).

Individual expression among the many

The first post-disaster protest against nuclear energy had taken place a mere two weeks after the 3.11 disaster, organized by a high school student in Nagoya, of some three hundred participants. But it was a monthly series of demonstrations that became the first symbol of a new age of citizen connectivity, agency and expressivity. On April 10, 2011, more than 20,000 demonstrators marched exuberantly against nuclear power in Western Tokyo, accompanied by live performances and mobile sound systems; a dramatic contrast to the usually regimented and staid marches hosted by labor unions of much of the postwar period (Manabe 2012; cf. Hayashi and McKnight 2005). A second demonstration the following month gathered similar numbers, and in June another 20,000 dancing demonstrators peacefully occupied the square outside Shinjuku station in explicit solidarity with concurrent events in Cairo's Tahrir Square (Amamiya 2011). Social media was instrumental in achieving this kind of turnout. Announced on a blog less than two weeks in advance but widely disseminated across social networks, it became a widely known and awaited event. Yet organizers had little interest in glorifying social media's role as anything more than instrumental to such a turnout, preferring a narrative of civil unrest generated by widespread, percolating discontent. As organizer Matsumoto Hajime of the group Amateur's Riot (Shiroto no Ran) explains, "It wasn't because our group tried to recruit many people ... but because everyone was so angry that word got around on its own" (Manabe 2012). "Why did so many people turn up to the demonstration?" asks another organizer. "They wanted to express themselves, that's why."

At the same time, the instrumentality of social media was emphasized precisely because it symbolized narrative of emergent citizen expressivity. In a web broadcast, Matsumoto explained his hope that "[even in] an atmosphere that constantly tells you to keep your worries to yourself, people can, even randomly, encounter this situation where it's suddenly possible to say something." Here Matsumoto is alluding to a spontaneously emerging discursive space that includes both exuberant protest crowds and digital publics—hashtags, video streams, imageboard threads, etc. The relationship between online and offline spheres of activity is described as at once instrumental and mutually constitutive: social media is both a tool of organization and a part of the party itself, situating the political into the everyday by translating an infected language of political participation into "something immanent to protesters' and spectators' own lives" (Hayashi and McKnight 2005, 90).

The campaign took place in a particular moment of post-disaster uncertainty, a lack of information and stifling atmosphere of mass-mediated, state-directed, disaster commentary. Along with countless concerts, many popular television shows were cancelled in the first weeks. It was a moment when, much like after the Showa emperor's death in 1989 (Kohso 2006), state and mass media rallied around campaigns of national mourning, steeped in a narrative of pseudo-patriotic rhetoric. This time we saw calls for unity and cooperation, such as "Hang in there, Japan" (*gambarō Nippon*) as well as more punitive messages that labeled non-official discourse as "dangerous rumor" (*jūhyō higai*) and calls for "self-restraint" (*jishuku*), read by many as "don't complain" and even "don't talk."

The early wave of anti-nuclear protests offered a space in which various concerns could be expressed simultaneously, in ways where social media proved particularly useful. In the past, and especially among the Japanese left, different groups often worked at cross purposes, institutionally unable to come together even when they shared ideological positions. The failure was epitomized by the common situation of different groups organizing protest events in different parts of the city on the same day, in what often amounted to competitive, rather than supportive, practice. On the other hand, in the post-3.11 era, social media figured simultaneously as

connection and environment, an association that does not co-opt the distinctness of individual initiatives or distinct social identities (cf. Hardt and Negri 2004). It allowed different groups to work together to share information, cross tag each others' efforts, and even protest together without having any one group be the official sponsor of the event, thereby threatening the face of another group. This same dynamic, of allowing the many to cooperate without collapsing it into a unity or identity, is how organizers imagined an aggregate of people "showing their individuality while saying, 'We're against nuclear power'" (Manabe 2013). Rather than a single institution (e.g. a church or labor union) framing a single position, social media encouraged a multitude of connections and contexts, demonstrating the many paths to, and possible positions within, a shared opposition to the restart of the reactors. In this case, the rallying around a common "adversary" was not so much radiation, nuclear energy, or the nuclear industry, per se, as it was a broader, ideological complex of state complicity that many considered the cause of the disaster itself, and certainly a complicity that retarded the response (see e.g. Hirose 2011).

Twitter demonstrations

Meanwhile, another group of organizers mobilized the symbolic power of social media in a more explicit direction. Much like the "Shabab-al-Facebook (Facebook Youth)" of the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the "TwitNoNukes" demonstrations elevated the Twitter platform itself into a symbol of active citizenship and dissent. While smaller and more conventional, these protest marches of a few thousand participants nevertheless presupposed and accounted for the role of social media in distinct ways. First, the enmeshment of actual and virtual protest spaces became very noticeable in the organizers' explicit endorsement of virtual protest participation as recognized and legitimate "participants." The "twitter demonstrations" were broadcast live to online spectators, vastly outnumbering physical participants. Here, social streaming interfaces like Ustream or Niconico produced a sense of effervescent participation for viewers, and successfully encouraged them to advertise and narrate real-time video feeds in ways that propagated across their own social network.

Second, TwitNoNukes organizers themselves derived their own celebrity status and legitimacy not from their external professional identities (as TV talents or academic theorists) but from their authority as virtual content creators, curators, and commentators in their respective subcultural communities. While most decisions were made by an established group of leaders, the public forum of Twitter hashtags implied an accessibility and accountability of individual organizers evocative of a liberal citizenship ideal (cf. Uesugi 2011; Coleman 2013). A TwitNoNukes flyer from early 2012 declares:

Anyone opposed to nuclear power can participate in this demonstration, regardless of ideological convictions or beliefs or principles. "Radiation is scary!" "I'm worried about the health of my children!" "I want to abolish irradiated labor!" There are plenty of reasons for opposing nuclear power in our daily lives.

But while the "Twitter demonstrations" embodied an idea of individual expression organized collectively, it is a very different collectivity than the multitude imagined by early organizers. In the context of protest they framed their call to action as originating not from an organization or group, but from "individuals gathering on Twitter." Ideologically, these activists thus eschewed both the repertoires of traditional social movements as collective actors, as well as the exuberant performance and frivolity of earlier anti-nuclear demonstrations (cf. Futatsugi 2012, 144). Instead, they both espoused and embodied a radical individualism modeled on the very structure

of the Twitter platform itself. One organizer explains that the campaign had “begun after the disaster as a non-partisan, single-issue, simple way to ‘lower the threshold’ of protest.”

In each of these instances, Twitter figures as a symbol embodying not only the technology that makes such connection possible, but also those social and affective connections themselves. Twitter was, in the first case, naturalized as a transparent medium in a cultural environment where spectacular street demonstrations, filled with a roster of artists performing from a mobile sound system, was a legitimate venue of political expression. In the second example, Twitter emblemized a counterpublic (cf. Warner 2002) in which “ordinary people” coalesced around well-defined and, above all, legitimate political concerns.

The ubiquity of social media and the interpenetration of the political content into the everyday, as argued above, implicitly postulate an acting political subject who is simultaneously an “ordinary” person. In contrast, in pre-disaster Japan as elsewhere, recourse to the nomenclature of the “ordinary” or “regular” has been invoked to identify, secure or perform a non-political space and social identity. Yet, in the contemporary patterns of Twitter participation, a platform of everyday sociality, and the rhetoric of the movement organizers that explicitly included a wide range of participants, in effect re-politicized the “ordinary.” As one organizer explains, “When I march, it is not as an activist, but as just a regular person. To act is regular, and regular people have to act. It is nothing out of the ordinary, at all ... We are all regular people here.”

A year after the disaster, these symbolic investments in social media returned in distilled form. Weekly anti-nuclear protests outside the prime minister’s office (Kantei-mae) grew from a few dozen protesters to hundreds of thousands. A survey asking participants at the weekly protests where they learned about the event revealed that Twitter was the primary source of information for 39.3 percent of the 491 respondents, while Facebook trumped television, newspapers and organizational newsletters at 6.7 percent (IPRSG 2012). Mass media attention to the weekly rallies seized on the connection between unprecedented turnout and the mobilizing role of social media in bold headlines. As the crowd grew toward the 200,000 mark, primetime television broadcasts announced a “surge” of protest by “unfolding on Twitter” (Hodo Station 2012). Commentators proclaimed the weekly assembly a new symbol of citizen expressivity and soon dubbed it the “Hydrangea Revolution,” a nomenclature that was quickly inscribed in the weekly protests as part of their narratives of popular legitimacy. At a July 2012 rally, sociologist Oguma Eiji declared that

if one person comes to the demonstration, it means another 100 agree with her ... and 100 to 200,000 participants equals one to two percent of Tokyo’s population, times a hundred ... that means the majority is on our side!

(Oguma 2012, 137)

Similarly, former Prime Minister Hatoyama Yukio (one of many politicians who opportunistically sought to associate themselves with the protests) warned his fellow lawmakers “not to underestimate this people’s power (*pīpuru pawā*); at last, the time has come for great changes caused by actions rather than words” (Iwakami 2012). At this point, we can see the way that social media has transgressed online and offline segmentation in order to constitute what is seen broadly within Japanese society as a legitimate and significant opposition to both the nuclear state and capital. Here in 2016, on the fifth year anniversary of 3.11, there are still weekly protests, testifying to a tenacity and endurance few would have anticipated. Japanese activists have employed the sort of technologies and techniques present in digital activism the world over, often with the sophistication and creativity that is distinctive, relative to other political contexts.

Ambivalent legacy

Social media have become appropriated instrumentally as tools of coordination and mobilization by countless social movements and political organizations worldwide. This chapter has focused on the ways in which social media acted in liberatory ways, promoting generally progressive causes, local autonomy, environmental sustainability, human rights, representative due process, and individual liberty. In any case, we have seen how social media has provided an alternative to both the narratives and expectations of a state and capital that has captured popular attention and fostered protester turnout. But the potential to disseminate information in ways that mobilize a wide range of individuals to action are powerful tools that can be used by anyone for any cause.

A case in point in this phenomenon has been the increase in xenophobic demonstrations, primarily against ethnic Koreans, soon finding its locus in the 2011 campaign against private broadcaster Fuji TV and its alleged popularization of Korean soap operas among Japanese television viewers. Monthly demonstrations outside Fuji TV's Tokyo headquarters gathered up to 5,000 participants (with the number of Niconico spectators several times that), seemingly eager to emulate aspects of the "festive" tactics witnessed in the anti-nuclear rallies earlier that year. Coordinated through Twitter hashtags as well as 2channel threads and Niconico video feeds, these events branched out into boycotts and attempts at public "shaming" of the station's sponsors, generating considerable media attention before dissipating within a few months. Of particular interest here is not only how in the context of resurgent anti-nuclear protest, a completely different set of issues achieved such considerable organizational momentum, but how in both cases discontent with mass media fed into a similar discourse and use of social media technology as the locus and condition of possibility for an emergent political subjectivity.

The ideological struggle between rival social media constituencies gained new intensity in early 2013, as several anti-nuclear organizers used Twitter to declare their intent to join the burgeoning antiracist struggle; not as part of the "counter" assemblies but in direct street confrontation with racist groups. On February 9, 2013, live video feeds showed a group of fifty militant right-wingers chased out of Shin-Okubo shopping streets by a crowd of anti-racist activists. Here is a clear case of organizational experience and knowledge produced in socially mediated discourse, and reproduced and redirected horizontally to disparate, although clearly linked, struggles. Yet, even these dynamics contain their ironies. At a public forum at Waseda University in July 2013, invited speakers lamented the inability (of an unnamed collectivity) to "suffocate" the wave of anti-Korean sentiment in its digital cradle—social media platforms such as Twitter, 2channel and Niconico—before it "leaked out" onto the streets. This is an inversion of broader narratives of social media, one that subverts the function of social media as a tool for actualizing citizenship, and of the formative and ideological emphasis on liberation that has been at the heart of so much more of the social media politics of post-3.11 Japan.

Since the Japanese government passed the State Secrets Law in 2013 (Repeta 2014), it is now a crime to even inquire into matters that are stipulated to be of national interest. Exactly what information is classified as sensitive or even the criteria that such classifications might be generated, let alone the process of determination, adjudication and punishment, is still left almost completely undefined. Ostensibly aimed at preventing military and industrial espionage, this law will probably further compromise the already tame, self-censoring mainstream news and TV in Japan. But in fact, the flow of possibly sensitive information is more likely to be found in the online publics of politically engaged, investigative work or critique that constitutes much of those parts of social media we have outlined above. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that other, much more ominous uses of both exclusion and repression are seemingly on the horizon in post-3.11 Japan.

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