Is Japan the ‘Galapagos Islands’ of Social Media?
By Shin Mizukoshi

Japan’s social media are a reflection of a unique popular culture that encompasses everything from “cute” icons like Hello Kitty to still-powerful and well-integrated newspaper and television companies. The system has evolved in a peculiar fashion that some liken to the isolation of species in the Galapagos Islands, which accounts for some unusual social media developments, writes Shin Mizukoshi.

DESPITE THE DECLINE of big electronic manufacturing giants such as Sony and Panasonic, Japan remains one of the world’s most affluent media societies, with a popular culture that is very vital and diverse. It may be less well known that Japanese culture is also an incubator for much of the world’s new social media.

In 2013, I attended several international academic conferences in Europe, and was surprised that most researchers referred to Facebook as the dominant and almost only social media (Twitter’s penetration in Europe has been weaker than in East Asia, for example). In Japan, however, Facebook has not spread as widely as in European countries. There are several competing domestic services in play such as Mixi and LINE, and the diversity of social media in Japan is in line with the breadth of popular culture in the country.

Japan’s cultural diversity emerged in a unique fashion in our archipelago. Recently, there has been much critical discussion about Japan’s “Galapagosization,” a reference to the Galapagos Islands that inspired Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution due to the unique species found to have evolved there as a result of their distant isolation from any continental land masses. In Japan, as the local mobile phone industry declined after the launch of the iPhone, observers said the Japanese mobile phone industry and even its popular culture had been similarly isolated from mainstream influences.

In this essay, I will discuss the characteristics of the social media landscape in Japan; in many ways, it is connected to the discussion of “Galapagosization” in Japan.

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ANONYMITY IN THE ONLINE SPHERE
One of the significant features of Japan’s media culture is the anonymity of Internet users. International research on the comparative culture of Internet users in several countries shows that the Japanese are the most hesitant to show their real names and images online. People tend to keep their online world disconnected from their “real” social world. My interpretation of these research results is that Japanese society is so regimented that people want a parallel and private world on the Internet. This is partly due to an educational system that gives few opportunities for public speaking and presentation in the classroom.

People in Japan have generated Internet communities that are like electronic cocoons: places to rest, heal and exist without exposing their real selves. These are cozy places. Japan’s “cute” culture is one suitable context for this, but online anonymity can also easily generate vicious cocoons filled with racism and nationalism.

ADVANCED IN MOBILE, BEHIND IN THE PC
Japan was the first country to connect the Internet to a mobile communication service. In 1999, NTT Docomo, Japan’s biggest mobile telephone company, started “i-mode,” a comprehensive but of the strong vertical integration of the telecom-companies launched similar services. In 2000, a consumer-generated virtual idol, for example, created a global digital diva that has become both an icon and the main paradigm for the communication streams of social media in the geek culture of Japan.

Cute content has inevitably influenced the social form of media and the architecture of media applications. One of the strongest points of the social network LINE is its system of “stickers” or “stickers” for communication. Almost all the stamp collections, including many user-generated ones, are dominated by kawaii. This phenomenon has pushed designers and engineers of social media into more visually oriented directions.

TRADITIONAL MEDIA IS STILL ALIVE
Unlike trends in the US, Europe and the rest of East Asia, Japan is still heavily influenced by its own peculiar traditional mass media ecosys-tem that developed during the process of modernization. The newspaper sector comprises five national newspapers, three regional newspapers and typically one additional newspaper per prefecture; there are also two major news agencies. The broadcast sector has five commercial network-works and one of the world’s biggest nationwide public broadcasters. Advertising is dominated by two agencies, Dentsu and Hakuhodo. Within this system, the players are tightly connected to each other and form a rigid and elaborate structure. This structure serves not only as an industrial media system but also as a cultural platform. Generated by collaboration — or collusion — among media companies, government administrations and the Japanese public, it has proven to be surprisingly resilient, especially when viewed from the perspective of other countries. This structure has never collapsed, not even once.

Interestingly, there is a close relationship between the traditional media and new social media. Detailed research about Japan’s media shows that most stories exchanged on social media are based on or originate from the mass media. A “storm” blows up on Twitter over a story picked up and amplified from the traditional mass media, which is then reported by the mass media and to which Twitter users respond. These “storms” are now a frequent occurrence, appearing and then disappearing quickly within the media landscape of Japan.

After the huge March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Tohoku, northeast Japan, and the disas-ter at the Fukushima-Daichi nuclear plants, Japa-nese social media has been changing. Many peo-ple started to use social media to aid communities in distress, organize relief efforts and participate in anti-nuclear demonstrations.

One big challenge, however, is relative size. Even an excellent social movement brought about by a powerful social media campaign is supported by, at most, a few hundred thousand to a couple of million participants. Meanwhile, the total popula-tion of Japan is about 127 million. The television audience, even though its influence is declining, still comprises several million viewers. This statis-tic differs, for example, from Singapore or Finland, whose total populations are around 5.5 million.

As many people use social media in those small countries as watch television.

Because of this, social media in Japan has been developing a new symbiotic relationship with the mass media. It seems the Galapagos phenomenon may involve new meanings as the landscape slowly evolves in its own way.

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