

Chapter 24

On the Spectrum of Communication: Locating the Use of New Media in the 2020 COVID–19 Emergency Response

Toru Yamada

Meiji University, Japan

ABSTRACT

By examining which media Japanese college administrators chose to use in order to communicate with their students during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the author argues that the intention behind administrator messaging correlates with the effectiveness of each communication medium. While some new media is used more commonly on one side of the world, the same media cannot function or is blocked in other parts of the world. Depending on the social contexts of the emergencies, the selection of a communication medium can turn out to rather be a hybrid of traditional telecommunication and new media, rather than an either-or selection.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, how Japanese college administrators use media in order to communicate with their students during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is analyzed through a case study. It is assumed that the intention behind administrators' messages correlates with the effectiveness of each communication medium. In the current globalized world, online platforms on the Internet such as social media tools and social networking services have often been portrayed as more effective communication mediums. Absolutely, new media has allowed us to communicate with those who are physically distant from one another by compressing our sense of time and space. For example, at the time of global level emergencies, the Internet and new media allow us to immediately get in touch with those at the epicenters. However, global level emergencies have posed challenges to new media. While some new media is used more commonly on one side of the world, the same media cannot function or is blocked in other parts of the world.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3201-0.ch024

Depending on the social contexts of the emergencies, the selection of a communication medium can turn out to be a hybrid of traditional telecommunication and new media, rather than an either-or selection.

The analysis of this chapter is based on a participant-observation case study which I conducted as I was working for a private Japanese university in Tokyo as the chair of the international exchange committee. Participant-observation is one of the core methods in anthropology, and necessitates that the researcher examine a community as he/she is involved in, rather than standing apart from, community activities. Through his/her involvement in the community, the researcher can acquire the perspectives and the logic which the community members – or the insiders, in other words – have. In anthropology, insider perspectives and logics are seen as crucial research components, as these are the foundations of decision-making and interpersonal relationships in a community. In participant-observation, as anthropologists engage with the community and take notes of what they are observing, they concurrently analyze what they see and how they see from his/her position. Therefore, participant-observation can be subjective as it values each researcher's personal position with other community members while it can also be objective as the position allows the researcher to describe and analyze the reasons and the rationale of community members in key social contexts.

Participant-observation provides a unique and vivid perspective of how decisions are made in each moment of time during an emergency such as the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. University administrators need to make their decisions on how to communicate with their students as they also need to be transparent with the public on the institution's pandemic response efforts. In an emergency situation, they constantly have to make decisions quickly as the situation rapidly changes. In every step of the process, the administrators have to choose the best communication mediums from landlines to social media depending on each emergency situation. In such pressing situations, participant-observation cannot only reveal the institutional contexts the administrators are immersed in, but also reveal the intentions and reasons behind which communication medium the administrators use.

CASE BACKGROUND: EARLY MARCH 2020, TOKYO, JAPAN

On the evening of March 5, 2020, Japanese news agencies reported that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe had announced that his cabinet was going to implement stricter border regulations in order to control the spread of COVID-19. Abe stated that, starting from March 9, 2020, they were going to invalidate the visas which had been issued by Japanese embassies and consulates in mainland China and South Korea, and to limit passenger flight arrivals from these two nations to two designated airports.

This announcement by the Japanese national government alarmed college administrators in Japan because international students from those two nations made up over 40% of all international students enrolling in Japanese post-secondary institutions (JASSO, 2019, p. 4). While college administrators were puzzled by some ambiguities in Abe's announcement, they immediately needed to inform their international students to consider coming back to Japan before the new border restrictions would come into effect. They had to reach out to their students within limited working hours as the news agencies reported the governmental announcement on Thursday evening and it was going into effect on the following Monday.

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