

Chapter 13

Going Online in the PC Graveyard: The Sociocultural Evolution of Japan's Mobile Internet

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how the keitai (mobile) Internet has come to dominate Japan, marginalizing the PC-based Internet. The discussion focuses on the country's cultural and ideological aspects that have worked as driving forces behind its mobile Internet boom. Special emphasis will be given to the validity of the common belief that the Japanese language has been a barrier to PC and Internet diffusion. This chapter argues that the Japanese language has actually encouraged rather than discouraged Internet adoption in Japan. Relying on media comparative analysis, this essay examines how Japan has developed a qualitatively different Internet use pattern that cannot be revealed in statistics like "number of Internet subscribers" or "household Internet penetration rates."

INTRODUCTION

Japan has been known for its technological innovations for a long time. Its pioneering adoption of the mobile Internet has been no exception, reinforcing Japan's reputation as a "techno-wonderland." For example, NTT DoCoMo's *i-Mode* was nothing short of revolutionary; the world's first 3G network service turned Japan from an Internet graveyard into one of the most wired nations in just half a decade. Whereas Japan's Internet penetration rate

was merely 37.1 percent in 2000, it soared to 68.5 percent by 2006 (ITU, 2003; MIC 2007, p. 28). Thanks to *i-Mode*, by 2005 Japan had risen to become the first nation where more people access the Web through cell phones than through PCs (Williams, 2006).

In spite of many efforts to export its home-grown innovations, however, Japan's mobile technologies have not taken off in foreign markets. As the *New York Times* reported recently, using the phrase "Galápagos syndrome," "Japan's handset makers have little presence beyond the country's shores" (Tabuchi, 2009a, p. B1). Even the legend-

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ary *i-Mode* service has failed to take root outside the country, including in Europe, North America, and Asia, and its limited popularity overseas is fading rapidly. As an explanation for this, critics have pointed at the overly complicated hardware and the “walled-garden” approach of Japanese mobile Internet services.

Although technological Darwinism has become a popular framework for understanding the evolution and divergence of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) in Japan, specific sociocultural factors in this unique development have rarely been explored. There are several studies that investigate the Internet penetration in Japan, but they tend to explain it predominantly from an economic or business perspective. For example, economic wealth is considered as one of the most important predictors of Internet use (Beilock & Dimitrova, 2003; Kiiski & Pohjola, 2002; Norris, 2001; Wareham, Levy, & Shi, 2004). The problem is, however, that Japan never fits into this explanation. In spite of being one of the world’s wealthiest countries, Japan was very slow to adopt the Internet until the mobile Internet gained popularity.

In an attempt to account for the exceptional case of Japan, Norris (2001, p. 55) lumped it in with countries that are “relatively affluent yet display lower than average Internet penetration rates” like “Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, as well as South East Asian states such as Singapore, Japan, and Brunei.” She went on to argue that “they can perhaps best be explained by the extreme inequalities of personal income and wealth characteristic of these states, possibly combined with some cultural restrictions on use through restricting Internet Service Providers” (Norris, 2001, p. 56). In reality, Japan is far from being a country with “extreme inequalities of personal income and wealth.” Although its income gap has widened with its long-term recession, Japan is still one of the countries with the least earning inequalities in the world. The country’s income inequality has consistently been lower than that

of many other successful Internet adopters like the U.S. and Canada (Jones, 2007, p. 9).

Although potential cultural factors are touched upon in Norris’s analysis, the approach is problematic, not only because it is unclear what cultural elements those countries have in common but also because cultural forces are seen as “restrictions” on technological diffusion. In this formation, culture hardly plays a central role, understood either as barriers to or as facilitators of the adoption of technology. To be explored later, however, the “cultural restrictions” on the PC-based Internet during the 1990s are the very vector that helped morph Japan into one of the most connected nations in the world in the following decade. Interestingly, the same cultural forces shaping “mobile Japan” that has been envied until recently for being “blessed with some of the best-looking technology in the world” are now coming under attack for turning the technological powerhouse into an isolated island (Fitzpatrick, 2007).

This chapter explores this irony, focusing on the sociocultural revolution of Japan’s mobile Internet, which skipped the PC and moved right into the cellphone. Against econo-centric views, this essay argues for a central role of culture in technological dissemination, shedding light on multifarious social, cultural, and ideological forces that cannot be reduced easily to quantifiable variables. In doing so, it also takes into consideration that the diffusion and use of the ICTs are often exposed to the random nature of “historical accidents” that “can neither be ignored nor neatly quarantined” in the analysis of technological diffusion (David, 1985, p. 332).

The Japanese wireless Internet is analyzed in comparative contexts to see how the shaping of it was influenced by earlier communication technologies such as the landline phone, pager, and word processor. Special attention is paid to the impact of the hardware-type word processor, which fascinated many Japanese during the 1990s by allowing them their first keyboard experience, and which, ironically, ended up blocking PCs

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