The "media exprimo" Project: New Horizons in Citizen Media Expression and Information Design

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1. Japan's media society: wealthy yet impoverished

Since the mid-1990s Japan has seen a rapid diffusion of digital media such as the Internet and the mobile telephone. During the first years of the 21st century people have increasingly used blogs, social networking services (SNS), video cameras and the like to express themselves or to give narrative and visual expression to the communities they live in. Today anyone -- not only the mass media -- can engage in media expression and information transmission. But is this seemingly abundant "media society" in which we live today really all that rich in its diversity? Let us take a closer look.

Japan now has over 100 million mobile phones in circulation, but these are used less and less for actual conversation, and increasingly for text-message exchanges among a close circle of friends. Though the devices now come equipped with a wealth of features, few of these are actually put to use. Hence a wide gap exists between mobile phone technology and the mobile phone users' culture. Blogs and SNSs have proliferated, but here too an "information gap" has emerged between users and non-users, particularly disparities in age, region, and educational background. In other countries, people are utilizing such services to connect with others sharing their concerns and initiate new kinds of social movements, but in Japan they are used primarily to

communicate with one's friends. Commercial services such as Internet shopping, auctions and ticket purchases also occupy a large share of Internet traffic, whether via personal computers or mobile phone services such as i-mode and ezweb. Meanwhile, instances of Internet libel and abuse, invasions of privacy, and mobile phone-related crime continue to grow unabated.

Although it is said that conventional mass media such as newspapers and television are being hard pressed by these new digital media, they continue to enjoy tremendous power and stability in Japan, perhaps more than in other developed countries. However, the concentration of media in Tokyo and the "convoy system" of government protection of a few large enterprises that have prevailed in these industries for the past half-century are ill-suited to the new media environment. With one case after another of fraud and fakery in the mass media coming to light, they are now hounded by criticism from both the government and the citizenry.

One might say that the Japanese media "ecosystem" remains under the sway of the mass media and therefore retains a strong mass-market, mass-consumption orientation. Within that framework, one can see a proliferation of "private" communications on the one hand and of commercial services on the other. However, the same cannot be said of "public" communications -- that is, those involving community revitalization initiatives, volunteer and nonprofit activities, education, welfare, the environment, international exchanges and other citizen activities, as well as regionally-based journalism and citizen-initiated arts events, performances, festivals and so on. Despite the fact that public communications are a linchpin of individual identity and community in our media-dominated society, and are crucial to the sustenance and growth of a democratic society, they are far from prominent in the media landscape today.

In short, Japan has single-mindedly pursued the development of information technology but has failed to achieve a healthy balance among private, commercial, and public communications.

2. From an information-saturated to an "expression-interweaving" society

To reiterate, Japan's media society is currently saturated with private and commercial information. The technological environment is in place for ease of media expression and information dissemination by anyone interested. But this environment has yet to give birth to media that are easy to use, culturally meaningful, and designed to make effective use of all this technology. The many cyberspace or online communities springing up today are designed to be closed, private affairs for small, tight-knit groups of people, and moreover function as purveyors of commercial services that treat users as consumers or customers. They are not adequately designed to empower people to create locally-based public networks through which they can become media initiators and express their own thoughts and views.

What is needed, it seems clear, is to transform Japan's media society from its current chaotic environment, one overwhelmed by waves of random information, into one that empowers people to create their own autonomous networks, express a diversity of narratives, and weave those narratives together in cooperative endeavors. Moreover, this transformation is not something to be left in the hands of government authorities or experts, but should be effected through active citizen participation. In a nutshell, we need to move from an information-saturated society to an "expression-interweaving" society.

Needless to say, such a transformation also requires top-down action in the form of studies and reforms in the areas of law, industry and economics. But our intention here is to present proposals for bottom-up

measures. Specifically, we propose to utilize the power of information design to develop technology systems and cultural programs that empower ordinary citizens to express themselves and create networks in the context of their daily lives. These systems and programs should be designed with a built-in flexibility that permits revision and adaptation by citizen users according to their objectives and community circumstances.

We believe that by interacting in a complementary relationship with top-down strategies involving the legal system and the industrial-economic sector, this bottom-up strategy will provide the key to creating a more diverse and more enriching media society.

3. The launching of "media exprimo"

As a first concrete step toward developing a bottom-up strategy we have launched media exprimo, an interdisciplinary research project that aims to help enrich and sustain citizen media expression. The name "media exprimo" will also represent the technology systems and cultural programs we intend to produce in the near future.

The media exprimo project includes four different research groups that collaborate in a cross-disciplinary manner: a core group engaged in information design research and groups engaged in interface and SNS engineering research, artificial intelligence and knowledge support system research, and humanities- and social science-oriented media studies. The goal of this collaborative effort is the research and development of digital information technology systems to support a new citizen-generated media expression environment, and cultural programs that foster media literacy and expression using these systems.

The overall objectives of media exprimo can be identified as follows:

(1) Develop technology systems to serve as a platform for an "expression-interweaving" society and supply the necessary information design.

(2) Develop cultural programs to support and sustain an "expression-interweaving" society and supply the necessary information design.

(3) Design the forms and modes required for the functioning of an "expression-interweaving" society.

The functions and objectives of the four research groups are as follows:

● Nishimura Group (real-world-oriented interface and computer-supported collaboration research)

   (1) Create a network system that makes visible the connections among media creators and their works.

   (2) Create devices for tracking and reviewing the media expression process.

● Hori Group (artificial intelligence and knowledge support system research)

   (1) Create a knowledge science-based "intelligent engine" for constructing (i.e., crystallizing/network-forming) narratives from collections of individual media expressions, as well as for deconstructing (i.e. liquefying/fragmentizing) existing narratives.

   (2) Create a system capable of automatic narrative generation as well as enabling manual narrative generation by users.

● Mizukoshi Group (socio-media studies)

   (1) Create a media reception literacy program to heighten the capacity for critical awareness of the problems of today's media society.

   (2) Create venues that encourage people to engage in media expression as well as a media expression literacy program for this purpose.

   (3) Construct a theoretical and philosophical framework for the overall objectives of media exprimo.

● Sunaga Group (information design research)
  (1) Design and package the technology systems developed by the Nishimura and Hori Groups into easy-to-use tools for expression; create an interface that makes the expression process visible.
  (2) Design modes for the use of these tools for expressive purposes by users.
  (3) Provide a comprehensive design for the output of media exprimo.

4. Basic methodology and practice

The four groups making up media exprimo will collaborate in "critical media practice" by selecting public venues in which citizens are actually engaging in media expression activities and using these for a type of social experimentation. Let us explain what we mean by "critical media practice" and elaborate on the nature of this practice and experimentation.

(1) Critical media practice through workshops

A workshop is normally defined as a participatory framework for learning or creation in which a group of people produce something or learn something in a game-like program format. Workshops are frequently used today to study or produce results in fields that cannot be readily mastered from lectures or reading alone. Examples include community revitalization, corporate training, environmental design, regional planning, and media arts.

The workshops envisioned by media exprimo share these conventional objectives and functions of group activity for learning or creation. However, we will utilize the "cultural probe" methodology employed in design research in Europe to expand and diversify the functions of the workshop in practice. This entails the experimental application of the

technology systems and cultural programs developed by media exprimo members under real conditions in society, and critical analysis and evaluation of their efficacy under these conditions. The workshop is thus a venue for experimentation and evaluation as well as for actual media creation by participating citizens. This more broadly defined, multifaceted concept of the workshop and the media activities that derive from it are what we mean by critical media practice.

The workshop we envision for critical media practice will function as follows. We will design a technology system to facilitate citizen media expression, plan a workshop (i.e., a type of cultural program, to use the term introduced above) to implement the system, and hold this workshop at a specific time and place. We will then analyze and evaluate the results of the workshop, based on which we will develop an improved system design and workshop plan. By repeating this cycle, we will incrementally improve the performance of both the technology system and the cultural program. Up to this point the program functions like a conventional workshop.

So far our scenario has been described from the standpoint of the developers or facilitators. From the participants' viewpoint, their role is to participate in this prearranged workshop and express or create something there. The latter half of this "practice" stage will be set aside for review of the expression/creation process to solidify participants' understanding and mastery of the process. Participants can then act as facilitators themselves by designing and planning workshops on their own, improving the technology system, and devising ways to manipulate it more effectively. Critical media practice is thus an open methodology that places priority on active participation.

These two forms of workshop participation, as observers/developers and as observees/participants, are closely linked and mutually interactive, precisely because the research process and the learning

process are themselves interdependent.

We can think of this multifaceted "critical media practice" workshop as an intelligent engine on which the various groups in media exprimo will engage in joint research, each with a particular role to play. The Nishimura and Hori Groups are responsible for R&D on the technology system; the Mizukoshi Group for R&D on the cultural program; and the Sunaga Group for overall information design. The cycle of repeated and improved workshops should provide the momentum for further research and development by media exprimo.

(2) Public practice via local broadcasters and museums

The public sector embraces a wide variety of activities and institutions. Since media exprimo aims to develop technology systems and cultural programs with as broad a range of application as possible, we must deal with real situations and resolve specific problems if we are to develop a general-purpose package. In other words, we must deal with the specific to achieve the general.

With this in mind, at the initial stages of our project we intend to focus on the activities of local community broadcasting stations and museums. Public cultural facilities such as these can function as incubators of media expression by local citizens. By networking with these facilities, media exprimo will lay the groundwork for its critical media practice. In the first half of 2007 the Mizukoshi Group will undertake surveys of different localities with the aim of selecting regional cities of various sizes for comparative experiments with Tokyo and other large metropolitan areas.

It is also the desire of media exprimo to work with research partners outside of Japan, for example in Europe, North America and elsewhere in East Asia. Rather than confine our critical media practice activities to

Japan, we wish to identify the Japan-specific characteristics in our systems and programs and find ways to overcome them so as to make these activities globally applicable.

5. Results from "media exprimo"

The actual fruits of media exprimo's efforts should make themselves apparent through practical application at public cultural facilities in local communities as we have described above. The users of the systems and programs we develop will be ordinary people. Unlike professional artists, researchers, or corporate engineers, these users are generally not seeking access to specialized technologies geared to limited objectives. They are citizens concerned about current problems in their own lives, their communities, or society at large, who wish to express themselves through media in a variety of ways. The mission of media exprimo is to develop systems and programs that facilitate this expression; indeed, that is what makes media exprimo a unique and interesting project.

With this mission in mind, we can perhaps define four potential results of the media exprimo project:

(1) Online collaboration system using a "deconstruction engine"
Using an expression support system based on the "deconstruction engine" developed by the Hori Group, the Nishimura Group is developing an online system that will enable media creators at remote locations to collectively archive records and memories and to dynamically edit documents and other products of their collaboration. The Sunaga Group will create the interface design for this system, which will have plug-in capability enabling connections to "personal" services, e.g. via mobile phone, as well as to large portal sites, SNSs and other commercial services.

(2) Expressive media with intuitive interfaces

Based on technology developed by the Nishimura Group, the Sunaga Group will design devices for tracking and reviewing the media expression process, providing an input system for image creation and editing readily accessible to ordinary citizens.

(3) Cultural programs to foster media expression and literacy

Simply having information technology and media in place does not guarantee the development of an "expression-interweaving" society. Just as essential is a cultural program that will foster and disseminate the media literacy and media-expression knowhow that citizens need to utilize these technologies and media to create, maintain, and expand venues for the expression of self or community. The Mizukoshi and Sunaga Groups will collaborate on research and development of such programs.

(4) Systematization of transdisciplinary knowledge on citizen media
    expression and information design

The Sunaga and Mizukoshi Groups will work together to systematize transdisciplinary concepts and theories supporting the development of the technology systems and cultural programs required to further citizen media expression and information design.