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The Mourning After: A Case Study of Social Media in the 3.11 Earthquake Disaster in Japan

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Abstract

In news media of late, much has been touted about the agency of social and mobile media in the events of political uprising or at times of natural disasters and crisis management. While these events did not become events because of social media, the media did affect how we experienced the situation. This leads us to ask, Just how helpful are social mobile media in maintaining relationships in times of crisis management, and how, if at all, do they depart from previous media and methods? Drawing from case studies conducted with participants living in Tokyo at the time of the horrific events surrounding Japan's earthquake and tsunami disaster of March 11, 2011 (called 3.11), this article reflects on the role of new media in helping, if at all, people manage crisis and grief. The authors argue that while social media provide new channels for affective cultures in the form of mobile intimacy, they also extend on earlier media practices and rituals such as the postcard.

Keywords

mobile media, social media, crisis, grief, Japan, affective media

Introduction: Good Grief

Against the backdrop of the increasing need for researchers to focus on stories of political emancipation (American Public Health Association 2009; Rheingold 2008; Bennett 2008), we must inquire about the role social media play, if at all, in helping

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people in times of natural disasters and crises. With the rise of social mobile media, we are increasingly becoming witnesses to various natural disasters with their own specific type of affective cultures. One key example—demonstrating both the possibilities and the limits of social mobile media—occurred in a location known for its innovation around such media, Japan. During the recent horrific earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear reactor breakdown on March 11, 2011 (known as 3.11), mobile media took two directions.

First, we saw how social media saw new channels for affective cultures. One decade on from the "people power" mobile phone civic engagement examples (Rheingold 2002) in the Philippines (Rafael 2003; Pertierra et al. 2002; Pertierra 2005) and South Korea (Kim 2003), mobile media were providing new effective and affective models for capturing, sharing, and monumentalizing events that encapsulated both collective and individual experiences. In the uprising of democracy in Iran, Egypt, and Tunisia, social media such as Twitter and Facebook took much credit for mobilizing action. In the case of Japan and 3.11, grief took on new technocultural routes in its connection of different communities. Not only did the mobile phone collect and disseminate these horrific events; it also helped shape the affective nature of the event. It fused the real with the reel. Here we see how digital media create new types of affective economies at the same time as rehearsing older media that are haunted by specters of the analogue (Hjorth 2008).

The other direction for mobile media, however, was the real limits of mobile communication. As millions panicked and attempted to call family and friends to see if they were okay, the phone lines jammed. The only other time this happened in Japan was in the 1990s when high school girls jammed the pagers meant for businessmen with their cacophony of text messages (Hjorth 2003; Matsuda 2005). These two directions signal both the possibilities and the limits of mobile media in negotiating the online and offline worlds. This is but one example of the cartographies mapped by mobile media—as communicative, creative, and political expressive tools—as they move across online and offline worlds into geosocial terrain.

Social media expands on earlier modes of civic engagement and media as they also depart from the previous media by providing various modes of visual, textual, and oral communication with greater affective personalization. Although extending Howard Rheingold's (2002) notion of smart mobs in which devices afford emergent types of collective and civic engagement, social mobile media also provide new spaces for networked, effective civic responses and affective interpersonal responses (Hjorth and Arnold 2011). While the notion of people power existed prior to media such as mobile phones and social media, these conduits allow for a new sense of collective affective power that makes us feel more connected. The "perpetual contact" (Katz and Aakhus 2002) of mobile media affords new types of copresence. It is the mobile phone's mobility that, dialectically, makes place even more important (Ito 2003).

Beyond these social aspects, the manner in which we imagine and navigate the online in conjunction with physical spaces has shifted with location-based services and Global Positioning System as part of the everyday mobile media experience. One

way of conceptualizing this straddling between copresent worlds is identifying the localized and vernacular versions of intimate publics in an age of mobile intimacy. That is, the ways in which the various forms of mobility (across technological, geographic, psychological, physical, and temporal differences) and intimacy allow for multiple cartographies of space in which the geographic and physical space is overlaid with an electronic position and relational presence, which is emotional and social. This overlaying of the material-geographic and electronic-social is what can be called mobile intimacy. In the case of crisis management, we see that mobile intimacy takes particular contours and colors that are shaped by the affective cultures surrounding social mobile media. This leads us to ask, Just how helpful are social mobile media in maintaining mobile intimacy in times of crisis management, and how, if at all, do they depart from previous media and methods?

Postpresence: Intimacy, Copresence, and Remediation

For Japan, one of the most notorious regions for frequent earthquakes in the world, many examples of images of crisis in different forms of then-contemporary new media can be found. While each medium comes with its different affective culture, it is also a remediation (Bolter and Grusin 1999) of previous modes of emotional interpellations. Each medium partakes in its own economy of copresence and forms of intimacy. Media remind us that intimacy has also been mediated: by language, gestures, and memories. It is just how the affective forms of labor are harnessed that has changed.

As one of the most intimate devices, the mobile phone is both the conduit for intimate relations and a repository for the user's intimate gestures (Fortunati 2002). While intimacy and emotions have always involved mobility (Lasén 2004), the types of intimacy afforded by the mobile device are particular in that they both extend older media practices like the postcard (Hjorth 2005; Milne forthcoming) and provide new modes of creativity, labor, and expression. By *mobile intimacy,* we are referring to mobility across a variety of permutations (technological, geographic, socioeconomic, and psychological to name but a few) that, like intimacy, traverse many spaces both imagined and lived.

In the wake of the convergence between social and mobile media, the migration of intimacy—like the notion of the personal (Ito 2005)—away from a space between people toward a technological mediation is notable. This transformation is represented by the rise of the notion of "personal technologies," which according to Clay Shirky (2008) represent the hijacking of the personal away from a space between people to a subset of social technologies. While the notion of people power existed prior to media such as mobile phones and social media, these conduits allow for unique forms of collective affective power that make us feel more connected and able to participate despite boundaries—linguistic, geographic, and temporal to name a few. But in this connectivity, users are also creating their own boundaries to reinstate divisions between online and offline worlds.

Writing before the onset of social media, Lauren Berlant (1998) observed that intimacy has taken on new geographies and forms of mobility, most notably as a kind of intimate "publicness." As intimacy moves from the private and personal into networked social media, the publicness—along with the continuous, multitasking full-timeness—of intimacy becomes increasingly tangible. They are now *intimate publics.* This shift undoubtedly transforms how we think about intimacy and media. However, it is important to contextualize the genealogy of intimacy and mediation. In the context of disasters, we see an amplification of this media genealogy in which the older practices of intimacy are further pronounced in the new media. Sometimes, the agency and immediacy demanded by participatory new media are too direct and multivocal—a point echoed in our study by respondents and their need to sometimes shut off from the relentless streams of opinions. Social media both rehearse and expand on existing practices and politics, especially in times of crisis (American Public Health Association 2009).

The recent interest in the role of social media during times of crisis could be seen as a response to the growing frequency of natural disasters and people power revolutions accompanying large-scale human casualty. While new media do not make revolutions happen, they do frame how they are conceptualized and experienced in different ways. In this affective scape, it is important to contextualize new media as part of broader media evolutions in which they are often remediations of older media (Bolter and Grusin 1999) and media archetypes (Sawhney 2004).

As argued elsewhere, the ability of mobile media to create a copresent dynamic of being both everywhere and nowhere, simultaneously home and away, extends earlier epistolary traditions (Hjorth 2005). For example, the postcard can be viewed as a precursor to the contemporary roles (and so-called dilemmas) of mobile phone practices such as SMS and MMS (Hjorth 2005; Milne 2004). The postcard carries with it a tautological proposition—to post is to transfer and mutate; thus, postcards are therefore much like metaphors. The postcard was marked by the politics of copresence—shifts in public and private spheres, fusions of work and leisure, being here and yet there, being present while simultaneously absent. In contemporary debates, similar copresences are perhaps found in the simultaneity of actual and virtual worlds (Morse 1998).

For example, an early instance of the role that media play in relation to commentary and social cohesion around disastrous situations can be witnessed in the function of picture postcards after the Great Kantō Earthquake in the Taishōera (1912~1926). During this period of high industrialization and social institutionalization within Japanese society, the picture postcard represented not only the growth of postal services but also the way in which these intimate copresences were visualized. Enlisting new technologies such as cameras and color printing, postcards were immensely popular before the era of visual mass media (Takano 2005).

The 7.9-magnitude earthquake hit Tokyo and its neighbor Kanagawa prefecture in September 1923, undoubtedly one of the most fatal natural disasters in a twentieth-century urban setting, resulting in more than 100,000 deaths. With little or no appropriate in-depth modern journalism coverage of this disastrous affair, picture postcards became the hottest medium to inform the general public of what happened in the city with actual visual images. Devastated cityscapes were rendered into snapshots, printed onto picture postcards, and sold immediately. Most sold out as soon as they were

released, but others were banned for distribution due to their sensational or inhumane portrayals. Picture postcards harnessed the idea of a picture's being worth a thousand words. While not having the immediate, networked context we see with social media, postcards did migrate across different spaces and temporalities, changing many hands and conveying many experiences. These intimate publics represented by the postcards could be viewed as prototypes for modern Japanese photo journalism (Sato 1994). In the recent crisis of 3.11, we find a patchwork of media practices that highlight participatory media conversation and new forms of "produser" (Bruns 2005) journalism, with specters of older, packaged media.

Conference, Not Conversation: A Testimony of Insiders

To examine some of the ways social and mobile media operate in situations of crisis and grief, we conducted an in-depth focus group with five graduate students who were staying in Tokyo during the 3.11 disaster. Our focus was mainly on the role of social media in both helping and perhaps hindering people's management of a crisis and the attendant affective culture. We asked informants what they were doing at the time of the quake and how they responded. Although most students acknowledged the advantage of having contacts with social media and mobile phones, the responses varied in terms of how they managed the media and how the media helped.

For example, for Yuki (all names are pseudonyms), age twenty-two, a woman living in Tokyo, much of her anxiety was couched in her usage of the *keitai* and its limited battery life, as the keitai played a significant role in how the events of the crisis unfolded. Drawing her information from newer media such as Twitter rather than TV, the social media also provided a form of counseling. Meanwhile, the way Toshi (Japanese man, twenty-three, from Tokyo) dealt with the situation and the bombardment of affective social media was to shut off. The picture he paints of the social media is one of overwhelming bombardment to which he responded by switching to older media that had no relationship to the current events.

Hyun-suk (Korean man, twenty-eight, from Seoul, living in Tokyo) expressed that social media functioned as "a conference rather than a conversation" for him and that he had both distrust and a feeling of bombardment toward them. Through the different deployment of both old and new media, online and offline spaces, we see some of the ways in which media are used to cope, or not, with a crisis situation: from Toshi, who used media such as games to shield himself and hide from the event; to Jie (female, twenty-four, originally from Shanghai), who used a variety of old and new media to both contact friends and family and find out ways to help; to Hyun-suk, who chose to stay with a group for friends for five days straight rather than use social media to be perpetually in contact with people elsewhere. From our conversation, far from new media's replacing older forms of media and mediated intimacy, we saw how various modes of subjectivity and affect play out in their own coordinated media practices.

Conclusion: Postcards from Elsewhere

Affective and personal technologies such as social and mobile media make us rethink old psychological models of emotion (Lasén 2004). As Sara Ahmed (2004) argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* things have been inverted—"the 'inside out' model has become an 'outside in' model" (p. 8). In the case of social mobile media, we are requiring new models and methods to examine the types of affective cultures and surfaces produced through, and by, the media. By exploring case studies of social media usage during points of crisis and the attendant deluge of grief, we can begin to understand some of the textures of affect around the participation in twenty-first-century media. While personal technologies such as the mobile phone are rewriting the relationship between mobility and intimacy, it is important to recognize that the intimate copresence enacted by mobile technologies should be viewed as part of a lineage of technologies of propinquity (Hjorth 2005; Milne 2004). Indeed, all forms of intimacy have involved some type of mediation and thus mobility—if not by technologies, then by gestures, language, and memories.

It is important to contextualize the so-called migration of intimacy toward the public as signposted by social media. As Esther Milne (2010) points out, issues about intimacy and privacy so central to debates about social media today were also pivotal in the debates surrounding the advent of the postcard. For Milne, the postcard "reveals that intimacy is a culturally constructed system of signification rather than an empirically verifiable, naturally occurring state" (forthcoming). As Milne observes, the lineage of the postcard and attendant forms of intimacy can be found in newer media. Twitter, like the postcard, does not "necessarily foreclose the production of intimacy and presence" (forthcoming) but creates different affects around the types of public intimacy. So too, our attempts to manage our various intimate publics and public privacies both online and offline are amplified in moments of crisis and grief. Through the lens of social media, we see that the media are affording some new types of networked counseling at the same time as they are highlighting the need for older forms of mediated intimacy, including face to face. Like the montage of grief that leaves its textures on an emotional terrain forever, social media deploy both new and old forms of intimacy and affective cultures.

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Bios

Larissa Hjorth is an ARC discovery fellow in the Games Programs, School of Media & Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne, researching gendered customizing of mobile communication, gaming, and online communities in the Asia Pacific region. These studies are outlined in her two books, *Mobile Media in the Asia-Pacific* (2009) and *Games & Gaming* (2010).

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