

Social Media and Children:

Report from the World Summit on Media for Children (WSMC) *

May, 2015

NAKAO Masumi

NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute
Media Research & Studies

*This article is based on the authors' article "*Sōsharumedia To Kodomotachi ~ Hōkoku: Sekai Kodomo Media Samitto Kara~*" [Social Media and Children: Report from the World Summit on Media for Children (WSMC)], originally published in the March 2015 issue of "*Hoso Kenkyu to Chosa*" [the NHK monthly report on Broadcast Research]. Full text in Japanese can be accessed at: http://www.nhk.or.jp/bunken/summary/research/report/2015_03/20150305.pdf

“In Japan, children have a so-called ‘two-second rule’ that upon receiving a LINE message, you must respond to it within two seconds”.

When this remark was delivered, the biggest stir of the day came from the audience gathered in the conference room in Kuala Lumpur.

1. Preface

The 7th World Summit on Media for Children (WSMC) was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from September 8 to 10, 2014. This is a symposium designed to consider as an international agenda what broadcast and digital media surrounding children ought to be, and to exchange information and views with participants from different countries on various aspects such as an impact and educational utilization of those media. It was the first time ever for this event to take place in Asia, and over a thousand media professionals, researchers and educators gathered from 60 countries around the world. Among the various sessions, I attended the one focusing on “Social Media” and made a presentation on the current situation of Japanese teenagers (age 10 ~ 19) who are extensively enthusiastic about a social media network called “LINE”. This report provides the content of my presentation at the summit, the background circumstances of social media in Japan and abroad, and the opinions of participants from other countries. Although much of the information may be nothing new to those well versed in social media, it would be gratifying to me if this report could help the readers understand the characteristics of Japanese children’s sensibility to social media, and the similarities and differences between Japan and other countries.

2. What is the World Summit on Media for Children?

The WSMC has taken place almost triennially in such cities as London, Rio de Janeiro and Johannesburg since its first Melbourne meeting in 1995. As the summit this time was held as part of a series of events celebrating the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) headquartered in Kuala Lumpur, it was treated as Malaysia’s national event under the sponsorship of the ABU and the WSMC Foundation, with the co-sponsorship of Malaysia’s National Broadcasting (RTM) and the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture. A large up-scale hotel located in the city center was reserved exclusively for the summit, where the First Lady of Malaysia made a greeting address at the opening ceremony. On the stage equipped with a camera mounted on a crane, children dressed in their indigenous garb showed a group performance. It was a very large-scale event.

Photo 1. Opening ceremony



The main program held in the ballroom with a seating capacity of about 1,000 consisted of 13 sessions as listed below:

1. **Potential for Media to Transform Children’s Education**
2. **Kids 3.0: Living in a Digital World**
3. **Digital Age Storytelling: The Everlasting Power of a Good Story**
4. **Programming for Children across all Platforms**
5. **Bridging the Global Media Divide for Children**
6. **Social Media Use by Children and Adolescents**
7. **Raising the Profile of Children’s Media**
8. **Creativity and Innovation in Education**
9. **Media Law, Policy and Children’s Privacy**
10. **Media Violence and Stereotyping**
11. **Best Practices in Interactive Media – Television, Gaming, Mobile and Online**
12. **Funding Children’s Content: Challenges and Opportunities**
13. **Social Responsibility of Media**

Each session lasted 45 minutes, where 3~4 presenters took the rostrum. I myself attended and presented in “Session 6: Social Media Use by Children and Adolescents”.

Another participant from Japan, Mr. Mizuto Tanaka, Executive Producer of NHK’s Youth and Education Programs Division attended “Session 2: Kids 3.0: Living in the Digital World” and made a presentation on an internet-based interactive programming technique. In fact, the Japanese children’s “two-second rule” that I mentioned at the beginning of this report was an episode that Mr. Tanaka had talked about in his presentation.

Given the excitement generated by Mr. Tanaka’s presentation, I explained to the audience in detail, what “LINE” that created the “two-second rule” is, how it was born and caught on in Japan, and also what the two related phenomena currently at issue are.

In what follows, I report the content of my presentation with data that it was based on. ¹⁾

3. The utilization of social media varies from one country to another

“The most popular social media network is Facebook, but that’s not the case in Japan. The most widely used in our country is a messaging application created at home called “LINE”.

(The words in bold are quotations from my presentation paper or remarks made during the session.)

The number of users of Facebook that is considered to be the world’s largest social media

network exceeded 1.3 billion last year. But as the following data by country shows, its share in Japan is unexpectedly low. This situation seems to be greatly affected by the presence of LINE. (For information, in South Korea where the penetration of Facebook is low just like Japan, its home-made application called “Kakao Talk” holds a dominant share.)

Table1. Facebook Users by Country

	Users <u>(in millions)</u>	Percentage <u>of Population</u>
Unites States	180	57.34%
United Kingdom	36	56.59%
Brazil	92	46.31%
South Korea	13.8	27.60%
Japan	22	17.25%

*Source: AUN Consulting, Inc. (June 2014)

In Japan, the number of Facebook users is 22 million, while that of LINE currently stands at 52 million, more than twice the Facebook population. What is more surprising is that although LINE was born in 2011, three years after Facebook and Twitter launched their services in Japan, it has enjoyed exceptionally rapid growth and overtaken them in population. This trend is evident especially in teenagers as clearly shown in the result of a two-year survey on the teenagers’ utilization of social media, carried out by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications after the birth of LINE.

Table2. Social Media Utilization by Japanese Teenagers

	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>
LINE	38.8%	70.5%
Twitter	26.6%	39.6%
Facebook	19.4%	22.3%

*Source: Institution for Information and Communications Policy (IICP), Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (April 2014)

Although the utilization of both Facebook and Twitter grew during the period, LINE stood out from those two with a 1.8-time increase, and I believe that the teenagers’ utilization of LINE could have risen even higher and reached 80.9% by now. Teenagers have a sense that “Facebook is a tool for adults, so LINE is the right one for them”. However, it seems to me that what has propelled LINE into this huge popularity is a certain concept behind the birth of LINE.

4. LINE has an unexpected background

In fact, LINE was born under the influence of a significant event that took place in Japan right before that. Do you have any idea what it was? That's right, the Great East Japan Earthquakes and Tsunami that occurred in March 2011.

I explained to the audience how social media had spread through the region in the wake of the disaster, by showing them pictures of the affected areas that were reduced to heaps of debris after being hit by a tsunami.

Right after the disaster occurred, it was actually Twitter that drew the first attention. It is well known that, while mobile phones were not working and e-mail communication was not reliable, a wealth of information transmitted and diffused via Twitter helped the relief efforts for disaster victims and distribution of aid supplies. As the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake accelerated the spread of mobile phones and internet in 1995, the use of social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook increased in the aftermath of the East Japan Great Earthquakes and Tsunami.

In that kind of situation, LINE made its first appearance three months after the disaster. While Twitter has an advantage for information dissemination, I understand that LINE was developed as a helpful means of keeping personal communications with family and friends in the state of emergency. One of the signature features of LINE is that when a receiver reads a message, an “already-read” text is displayed on its sender’s mobile screen. So when you sent a message to a missing person of your family in a time of disaster, the “already-read” text coming up on your phone can prove for sure that the message was read. You can learn that the person is at least all right even without receiving a reply.

However, later on, this “read-and-through” display function started having an impact on children’s communication in an unexpected way.

For the Japanese teenagers who are heavily into the LINE communications, sending out a message, seeing an “already-read” and still receiving no reply means “the receiver did read my message but ignored it,” and they feel lonely and angry about it. This is called a “read-and-through” situation. On the other hand, the receiver also feels pressured and afraid that not responding right away would give the sender an impression that he or she did “read-and-through”. That is to say, the “read-and-through” situation causes psychological stress to both senders and receivers.

The “two-second rule” that I described earlier would have been created by their serious obsession with this “read-and-through” function. If a “read-and-through” causes one child to be disliked by the others, in many cases, the disliked child has to be cornered into another difficult situation peculiar to LINE communications.

What has made a bigger problem is “exclusion from a LINE group”. LINE allows you to form as many communication groups as you would like. But while children are communicating with each other within a friend group, it sometimes happens that they exclude one particular child they don't like from their group, or

form a new group without the excluded member. This situation is a matter of concern as it may cause bullying.

Both “read-and-through” and “exclusion from a LINE group” have come out of unique characteristics of Japanese people who have a very strong sense for human bonding, and this situation is called “dependence on human bonding” as one of the “Internet addiction phenomena”.²⁾ It could be said that after the quake and tsunami disaster, the digital technology developed as a tool to keep people together has created a sense of obsession with “bonding,” and furthermore, it has developed an “unexpected side effect” that may cause bullying by excluding friends from a group.

I concluded my presentation with a summary of my study. “Internet addiction” and “Internet bullying” seem to be issues that every country is facing. The remarks made by the participants from other countries noted that although the forms and senses vary from one country to another, they have similar situations at home as well.

Photo 2. Discussion in Session 6

(The author, second from left)



5. Reports from Portugal and Brazil

In “Session 6: Social Media Use by Children and Adolescents,” studies conducted in Portugal and Brazil were also reported.

The first presenter was Dr. Christina Ponte from the Nova University of Lisbon (Universidade Nova de Lisboa,) who reported on noticeable trends of children’s internet utilization revealed through two detailed surveys jointly conducted with EU member countries in 2010 and 2014.

If you compare 2010 with 2014, we see that the amount of use of social networking sites has increased particularly among boys and teens over all. In Romania, the SNS use has grown from 46% to 79% in just four years, and among the children who have their profiles on the social networking sites, almost 40% of them have more than 300 contacts. But actually, 4 in 10 children give a false age on SNS because Facebook, the most popular SNS in Europe is supposed to have an age restriction of 13 years old or older. In Portugal, 80% of children who use the Internet, age between 11 and 12, already have a profile on Facebook.

As a rule, Facebook requires its users to register personal information, and in the United States, the birthplace of Facebook, the utilization of social media is restricted by a federal law that protects personal information of children under 13 years of age. However, according to Dr. Ponte, in Romania and Portugal, as the number of children who lie about their age has increased rapidly, so has the number of bullying and harassment cases involving Facebook. She also said, the outcome of the interview surveys with children shows that they wish to prevent bullying themselves as well.

Children would like us to stop bullying before it gets much bigger and out of control. As for parents, they hope to have more respect, but if the parents lack knowledge of the internet, sometimes children fear having to explain what they were doing. We all together should promote measures to cope with the problems and listen to children and young people in order to understand their view points of the situations

Dr. Ponte's view is that adults should not deny the feelings of children suffering from being bullied and just try to get them out of the current situation, but must share children's perception of internet literacy and deal with the problems from the same viewpoint as them.

In contrast with this report from Europe, Dr. Alexandre Barbosa, Executive of Brazilian Internet Steering Committee said that in a country like Brazil, it is quite difficult for adults to have such a viewpoint and mindset.

In Brazil, half of the parents of children don't know how to use the internet. High income households and highly educated parents know how to use the internet and have educational strategies to raise awareness in their kids. But the medium social economic class, low income households and low educated people don't have access and don't use the internet. And yet kids use the internet on devices such as smart phones. On average, we have 51% of individuals using the internet, but when it comes to kids from 10 to 15 years old, the proportion is very high with 71%. As the situation in our country is very complicated, the government has to guide educators and parents on the safe use of the internet. If you take some countries in Europe where 100% of parents use the internet, they are more prepared to deal with their kids using it.

6. Looking back the WSMC

In this 45-minute session, we were unable to derive a conclusion or present a proposal, as we ran out of time when completing reports from three countries and taking several questions from the audience. However, now revisiting the views of the presenters from Portugal and Brazil, I find it definitely important for parents' generation to share the same perception as their children.

For a long time, I have engaged in production of TV programs aimed at youth, and since the 1990's, I have covered various tools and problems related to young people's communications. Having the opportunity to attend this symposium related to my career field, I have some sense that social media networks such as LINE and Facebook, unlike the earlier media aimed at youngsters, have

the potential to bridge a gap between generations if we figure out how to use them. It is certainly true that there are various problems such as using them as a bullying tool, but it is also true that social media have contributed to the activation of our communications. Through the LINE communications, many children should have made new friends other than their classmates, and there should be more families in which, by joining LINE together, conversations between parents and their children have increased.

The wide society is a “social” unit, and schools and families are both a “social” unit as well.

(Masumi Nakao)

Notes:

1) When we discuss social media, there is another argument that “LINE is a closed communication platform and not a social media network”. This report follows the research model of the Institute for Information and Communications Policy (IICP) at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) that classifies LINE as social media together with Facebook and Twitter.

2) Hashimoto, Y. (November 8, 2013) <http://www.nippon.com/ja/currents/d00102/>