

EDITORIAL

Japan as number-one blogger

Japanese, a recent survey found, is the most common language for blogging. With 70-some million blogs now in all languages, Japan edged out even English and Chinese for the top spot of blog language. A third of all blogs in the world, or virtual world, are written in Japanese. Japan is now number one -- at blogging.

"Blog," of course, is a term that can apply to anything from company home pages to serious muckraking to photos of a new pet kitten. There is seemingly a blog for every human experience. Most blogs have gone up in the past two years, with thousands of new ones added everyday. Blogging even serves as a plot device in films and TV dramas. Yet, why are Japanese in particular so interested in expressing their opinions online?

Of course, Japan has a highly literate population with a fascination for new gizmos and techie games of all kinds. Digital cameras, easy-to-use software and teensy keyboards, in short, all the tools and techniques for blogging, are now part of tech-loving daily life. Yet, what does it say about Japanese culture and life that so many people express their thoughts, record their activities and find friends by blogging?

Freedom and anonymity are surely a large part of the appeal. Workers can complain about bosses, wives about husbands, citizens about politicians and *otaku* about anime characters. In a culture of polite language, proper body gestures and strict intonation, blogs "speak" with amazing casualness and candor. In a high-pressure society, blowing off steam is healthy.

Also healthy is the sense of "just chatting." This basic human need is largely absent in huge cities of Japan, where striking up a conversation with a stranger would seem imposing, strange or suspicious. In the blogosphere, though, there are no strangers: anyone can "talk" to anyone. Google a topic and you have found new friends. Conversing, however trivially, with

unknown people is a basic human fascination.

In the past, heavy demands from work and predetermined social spheres restricted wider contacts. Blogging shows that people's interests are broadening, friendship is diversifying and the constraint of old social connections may be less relevant than in the past. People have also started to distrust encyclopedias, media and "official" writing. For some things, everyday conversation feels a lot more trustable. A social transformation may well be -- literally -- at hand.

However, blogs are inevitably a little alienated and distant. While blogging demands neither polite bowing nor dressing up, no actual human contact is possible, either. The universal smiley sign -- :) -- is a poor substitute for a genuine human smile. Body language, anthropologists estimate, conveys up to 80 percent of the message in human communication. Blogs will never carry all the complexities of "live" interaction.

And though people may be able to talk more easily about their problems online, they are removed physically from the very people who might actually offer them concrete help. Oversight for some of the worst problems -- stalking, suicide groups or increased isolation -- may be impossible. In the future, many people will essentially live out much of their lives as virtual online experiences. Something about that feels very sad.

Yet still, blogging stems from the need to assert one's existence in language for others to read. This is an impulse that in Japan goes back to at least the work of Sei Shonagon's "The Pillow Book." Reflecting on the beauty and meaning of life is a large part of what blogs inspire. Most blogs revolve around a very human exchange of feelings and thoughts. Japan may be number one at musing, too.

Blogs signal not only rejuvenation of old genres of writing, but a new kind of language as well. Falling somewhere between the formality of a business letter and the looseness of friends at a late night bar, blog language feels hybrid and intermediary, yet more nuanced and fuzzily human. One wonders whether blog-speak will eventually start to re-shape the language itself.

If it does, the impact of blogs on social life and discourse will be even stronger. Still, one can guess that there is a lot more blogging about virtual experiences of all kinds than actual experiences themselves. Blogs are acting out in words, without taking action. A genuinely open society can tolerate the

fantasies and expressions of its people, especially in words, but it also needs actual participation in real institutions for it to thrive.

One might hope, too, that at some point blogging might develop into actual human interaction of the old face-to-face kind. Whether it will or not remains to be seen. And as with most technologies, whether it functions as an escape from reality, a retreat to foolish trivialities or an evolution to more substantial forms of human interaction depends largely on the human element of choice.

There must be a blog on all this out there someplace -- and in Japanese.

The Japan Times: Sunday, April 22, 2007
(C) All rights reserved

[Go back to The Japan Times Online](#)

[Close window](#)