

TECH_JAPAN

Web

Japan, the Twitter nation

By AKKY AKIMOTO

According to Twitter's official blog (blog.twitter.com), when the clock stuck midnight last New Year's Eve, Japanese Twitter users went crazy, recording 6,939 tweets per second—a new record at the time. In fact, globally 14 percent of all tweets are in Japanese—second only to English, with 50 percent—which explains why Japanese was the second language to be added to twitter menus. And according to Virginia-based research firm ComScore, 20 percent of all Japanese are using Twitter, while only 8 percent of people in the United States are users. Twitter has grown so much in Japan that it now has more visitors than Japan's most well-known social network service, Mixi. And last month, Twitter appointed their first international manager outside the U.S—in Japan. But why has Twitter been embraced so rapidly here?

The first wave of Twitter users in Japan was basically limited to influential people/bloggers who knew about the buzz generated by Twitter at the South by Southwest music and technology conference in Spring 2007 in Austin, Texas, who suggested that their readers should give Twitter a try.

Because Twitter was such a simple service and did not have much text (at the time only in English), it was fairly easy for non-English speakers to pick up. In those early days, however, to actually tweet in Japanese script you needed to add two specific characters—one space and one period—at the end of your tweet so it would be accepted by Twitter's system. But rather than being an obstacle, the first Japanese people fascinated by Twitter enjoyed such a silly obstacle. Also, if the people you chose to "follow" were all Japanese, you wouldn't see much English except for a few menu texts like "login" and "submit." All these things made it fairly easy and attractive for people to use Twitter, even though there was no localized Japanese version.

Historically, Japanese web services that are similar to—and sometimes copies of—U.S.-based web services, often end up becoming more popular than the originals because the locally produced ones are in Japanese and designed to fit Japanese culture. Also, many web services wait a few years until they are established before moving into the Japanese market—by then it often too late (e.g., eBay vs. Yahoo! Auction; Google vs. Yahoo! Japan; Facebook vs. Mixi).

At first it seemed that Twitter too would be easy to copy, and there have been lots of Japanese clones by small startups. However, the speed with which Twitter was accepted did not give the competition much chance.

Another factor in Twitter's success in Japan could be that, at first, the Twitter head office in the U.S. didn't seem to know what was going on in Japan. With no Japanese-language support on searches, trends and hashtags (#) the Japanese twitterverse was largely unseen from HQ. Because of that, Twitter became a the place where Japanese Internet users—using pseudonyms—could enjoy saying whatever they wanted. In particular Twitter became popular with 2-channel users despite having less anonymity than that huge anonymous Web-forum service.

This loose control may also have allowed "bot" culture to flourish in Japan. Twitter-bots are small software programs that are designed to mimic human tweets. Anyone can create bots, though it usually requires programming knowledge. Some bots reply to other users when they detect specific keywords. Others may randomly tweet preset phrases such as proverbs. Or if the bot is designed to emulate a popular person (celebrity, historic icon, *anime* character etc.) their popular phrases will be tweeted.

Not all bots are fully machine-generated, however, and interestingly the term "bot" has also come to refer to Twitter accounts that are simply "fake" accounts, much like the fake Steve Jobs account (see a list of popular Twitter-bots below).

It's hard to say exactly whether bots are more prolific in Japanese than elsewhere, but I would guess that they are—especially as one bot-generator alone serves more than 200,000 Japanese bots, which tell fortunes and tweet proverbs and random quotes. There is even a book published in Japan on how to make Twitter-bots.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the most popular fully automated bot these days is @earthquake_jp which tweets earthquake alerts, and was part of the huge surge in popularity of Twitter just after the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake on March 11.

Up until then the Japanese media was really fond of Facebook, which had been gaining ground in Japan as more and more Japanese users signed up. The Facebook movie "The Social Network" released in January assisted that trend. However, at the time of the megaquake and tsunami only about 2 percent of the population were using Facebook.

As mobile phone networks went down after the quake, people turned elsewhere to contact each other, and Japanese TV and newspapers suggested that social media, which by then basically meant Twitter, was a good alternative when disaster cut off other communication channels.

The Prime Minister's Office, the Ground Self-Defense Force, Tokyo Electric Power Co. and many other public organizations opened Twitter accounts after the quake. The government even issued a "social media guideline" for local governments who wanted to join, and the "social media" quoted in the document meant Twitter. In the long run, Japanese will probably jump onboard Facebook, the way people have around the world. But until then, Twitter has established a solid bridgehead in Japan.

Popular Twitter-bots include: Snoopy (@SNOOPYbot); Moomin (@moomin_valley); Peter Drucker (@DruckerBOT); Random phrases (@kotoba_bot) Akky Akimoto writes for Asiajin.com. A Japanese version of this article is available on his blog at akimoto.jp. You can follow him @akky on Twitter.

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