**MOBILE PHONES, JAPANESE YOUTH,
AND THE RE-PLACEMENT OF SOCIAL CONTACT**

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I'd like to start with a sequence from a popular Japanese comic strip, Gals, to give you a glimpse into the lives of Japanese teens and the framing issues for this talk.

The scene opens with our protagonist, Ran, a high school sophomore, sitting on her bed in her pajamas, scowling at her mobile phone showing the time as one am. Referring to her boyfriend she yells "That jerk Tatsukichi has voicemail on his phone again! He's telling me he's busy with his work…! But I wonder if he's cheating on me or something?!" Her sister, Sayo, suddenly appears. "Hm… you two really don't connect do you." "Hey! What are you doing here Sayo!" "This is a dangerous sign. A true couple is in a pipipi relation with each other." What?? 'Pipipi'?" "For example, I am sending my Masato I love you vibes right now." Sayo's phone rings, showing "Masato" on the screen. Ran tries the same, but to no avail. Her vibes fail to get through to her boyfriend and she leaves an angry message on his voicemail saying that she is going out to the beach in the morning in search of hot guys (Fujii 2001).

I'd like to call out a few aspects of this scene. First, and most obviously, the mobile phone appears as fetishized object, highly personalized, decorated with stickers, special hand straps and antennas. It also is an embodiment of relational connectivity. The relational breakdown between Ran and Tatsukichi is represented by a temporal disconnect, the lack of immediate access through the mobile phone. Their schedules are out of synch, their phones are out of synch, as are their affections. In contrast is Sayo and Masato's ultra-connectedness despite their spatial distance. All she has to do is think of her boyfriend and her phone rings.

More to the point of this paper, I'd like to point to the timing of this exchange. It's one am, on a summer night. After parents are asleep is relational prime time for the teens in this story, the time to affirm their connection, even while they are all expected to be home. Tatsukichi's inavailability at this hour is an aberration, a suspicious sign of infidelity.

This is a social scene that would have been impossible prior to the advent of the mobile phone. Kids wouldn't have their own personal phones, much less

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voicemail, and would not have had the freedom to call each other at all hours of the night. The wee hours of the night would have been tightly controlled by the parent-dominated space of the home, and one could hardly imagine a message about "looking for hot guys" being left with a parent, much less after one am.

In this talk, I want to look at how the mobile phone reshapes relationships and the power-dynamics of the home for Japanese youth, looking at what Doreen Massey has called the "power-geometry of space-time compression." Arguing against "easy and excited notions of generalized and undifferentiated space-time compression," (Massey 1993: 63). Massey argues that

> different social groups are placed in very distinct ways in relation to late modern flows of media, people, and capital. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation *to* the flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway-differentiated mobility; some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it."(Massey 1993: 61)

I draw from Massey's framing, but also work further to specify the particularities of these power-geometries of space-time compression. It is not only that certain people are differentially located within these power-geometries. The same person can be alternatively in control or lacking control of communicative and cultural flows depending on lifecycle stage, different spatial and temporal locations and their access to new technology. For teens, this means that their communications and connections to peers are regulated by themselves or others depending on place and time of day, and that access to mobile media takes a central role in managing and inflecting that control.

The mobile phone is one of the more recent and emblematic technologies of space-time compression, touted as a tool for anytime, anywhere connectivity, supposedly freeing the user from the limits of place and time.   Heinrich Schwarz and his colleagues have critiqued the image of what they call "a world of more flexible, mobile, temporary and technologically mediated work." Their paper on "the hidden work in virtual work" describes some of the costs of increased connectivity, as workers struggle to maintain and manage their own flexible networks of people and technologies.(Schwarz, Nardi, and Whittaker 1999). It is not all freedom and motion in the land of virtual work, but as Massey suggests, a power-geometry of ongoing negotiation, social differentiation, and struggle.

I also share in this project to specify and locate what kinds of social practices get played out through new media technologies and discourses of virtuality and mobility. I approach this problem through a very different case, however, then

the high-tech workers in Schwarz et al's study. In contrast to the image of the mobile-phone toting executive, in Japan, the poster person for the mobile phone is the teenage girl, particularly the street-roving fashion victims called *ko-gyaru* (little gals) like Ran.

For the past two years, I have been conducting ethnographic research on youth and children's technoculture in Tokyo. My focus has been on the media ecologies of youth and children, looking in particular at the negotiations around media consumption and the micropolitics of the home as a site of struggle between the interests of children, peers, parents, and media industries. In contrast to the high-tech worker and the highly paid executives, youths lack financial and social power, and their time and space are highly regulated by adult-dominated institutions of home and school. While they do have large amounts of discretionary time, energy, and mobility that is the envy of working professionals and parents, they are limited in their activities by certain structural absolutes, such as dependence on parents for food and shelter, and educational requirements that regulate their schedules and attentional economies.

In this presentation, I would like to give you a sense of some of these dynamics, looking at how mobile phone use is embedded in specific social locations that youth occupy in urban Japanese culture and society, and in turn, how usage reshapes relationships to time, space, peers, and parents. In other words, I will be presenting a picture of how Japanese youths' mobile phone use is both located within an existing power-geometry of space-time compression, and constitutive of different ones. I will be drawing from my ongoing fieldwork in Tokyo, but most specifically, from interviews conducted in the winter of 2000, with twenty-four high school and college students about their mobile phone use.

First, I want to provide a brief overview of how youths in Tokyo use mobile phones, before moving to more specific examples.

Mobile communications have been used extensively among Japanese youth since the mid-nineties when pagers became a common accessory for high school and college students. Different variants of mobile phones have proliferated since the late nineties, but in the past three years or so, it has become common for high school students to carry them. Mobile phone ownership is at approximately 60% of the overall population in Japan, and most heavily concentrated in the youth and young adult populations. Getting a mobile phone is something of a rite of passage, which, until very recently, marked the move to college and a more independent life, but now is generally given to kids when they enter high school.

There appear to be cross-cultural similarities in the intersection of youth and mobile phones (Ling and Yttri 2001, Weilenmann and Larsson 2001). For

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example, Rich Ling and Birgitte Yttri have described how Norwegian youths have a distinct pattern of usage, which they call "hyper-coordination." In contrast to the more instrumental uses that older subjects described, youths in Ling and Yttri's study describe how they use their phones for emotional and social communications, particularly for cementing peer relations. "Unlike adults who could feel stressed by the mobile telephone, the teens thrived on access and interaction" (Ling and Yttri 2001).

Ling and Yttri describe adolescence as a unique time in the lifecycle, how peers play a central role during this period, and how the mobile phone becomes a tool to "demarcate the boundary between the teens and their parents" as well as a means for maintaining their social networks (Ling and Yttri 2001). Their work resonates with what I have observed of how phones occupy a central role in the social negotiations among Japanese youths. In addition to identifying uses of the mobile phone, I feel it is also important to locate these practices within the power-geometries that regulate their space and time. Uses of the mobile phone are not direct expressions of individual or group identity, but rather are structured by time, space, as well as social relations.

There are also some peculiarities to the urban Japanese case with respect to the politics of location, particularly the home context. While I am ignorant of the situation in Europe, I can make some comparisons to the US. Most notably, Japanese youths, through college, have less private space compared their US counterparts. The Japanese urban home is tiny by middle-class American standards, and teens and children generally share a room with a sibling or a parent. Most college students in Tokyo live with their parents, often even after they begin work, as the costs of renting an apartment in an urban area are prohibitively high. Because of these factors, urban Japanese youth generally take to the street to socialize. For high school students, this usually means a stop at a local fast food restaurant on the way home from school. College kids have a bit more time and mobility, gathering in cafes, stores, bars, and karaoke spots in urban centers. Again, unlike the US, there is no practice for teens to get their own landline at a certain age, or to have a private phone in their room. The costs of running a landline to a Japanese home are very high, from $600 USD and up, about twice what it costs to get a mobile phone. It is thus extremely rare for a home to have more than one landline.

When turning to the school context, there is quite a bit of variability about how teachers deal with mobile phones, but in general, schools are getting stricter as mobile phones become more pervasive and acquire more functionality. It is not uncommon for students to leave their mobile phones out on their desks during class, claiming that they use the clock function. But some schools prohibit use entirely, and all teachers we have heard of prohibit voice calls and ringers during

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class. The mobile phone gets used most frequently during the lunch time hour and immediately after school, as students scurry to hook up with their friends.

Other spaces that youths frequent have varying degrees of regulation with respect to phone use. Public transportation and restaurants are generally off-limits to voice calls, though text input is considered acceptable. Most trains, buses, and many restaurants display "no mobile phone signs."   The street and train platforms are open to voice calls, but are generally extremely noisy, and it is difficult to have a sustained conversation in these locations.

Students move back and forth from the space of the home—where they may have some privacy and discretion over their activities, but lack physical access to friends—and the space of school—where they are physically co-present with their friends, but have severe constraints on forms of social contact. The mobile phone becomes a tool for overcoming some of the constraints inherent in the power geometries of both of these places, as well as a way for appropriating spaces of the street, restaurants, and public transporation.

Let me move into the interviews. First, I want to give you a feel for how high school students view their place in the parent-dominated place of the home, which has traditionally been the place for phone contact. Than I will describe alternative networked places enabled by mobile phones. Here is an excerpt from an interview with four high school girls who are close friends.

> Interviewer: You all live close to each other. Do you visit each other's homes?
> Student1: We don't. It's not that we are uncomfortable, or our parents get on our case, but it's like they are too sweet and caring, and you worry about saying something rude, or talking too loud. You can't be too rowdy. So we don't meet in our homes.
> Student2: Occasionally. Maybe once a year. Actually, that's not even occasional.
> Student1: And if it happens, it is at a friend's house where they have their own room.

This stance was very consistent across the youths that we interviewed. Meetings among friends almost always occurred in a third-party space run by indifferent adults, such as a fast food restaurant, karaoke spot, or family restaurant. Even for college students living on their own, their space is generally so small and cramped that it is not appropriate for hanging out with groups of friends.

The phone has always been a way of overcoming the spatial boundary of the home, for teens to talk with each other late at night, and shut out their parents and siblings. However, the mobile phone has revolutionalized the power-

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geometry of space-time compression for teens in the home. The identity of the home landline is a communal one, expressing the identity of the entire family rather than the identity of the individual teen. The gist of the problem here is having to talk to a parent or sibling when trying to contact a friend, particularly if the call was to be made late at night when family members were likely to be asleep. While there were variations in how comfortable they felt calling a home phone, all that we interviewed were consistent in stating a preference for calling a friend on a mobile rather than home phone. This preference is balanced with the greater cost of the mobile phone call, which is often paid out of allowance or part time jobs. Youths now generally do not have the home phone numbers of any but their most intimate friends.

Here are a few quotes to provide you with a feel for the responses. One college boy explains:

> … Compared to before, now you don't have to call a home phone and can call someone direct. Before, when you wanted to talk to someone, you had to call their home phone and ask the father, mother, brother or someone to get the person. Yeah, people say it is a hassle. I didn't feel like it's so much of a hassle. The thing for me is that I call late at night, so I felt kind of bad about that. If it's a mobile, at night, or whatever time of day it is, you're not bothering anyone.

A high school girl describes how she makes gender-based choices of what phone to call.

> Interviewer: Do you call friends on their home or mobile phone?
> Student: If it is a boy, I will call their mobile. If they have one, I will call their mobile. If it is a girl, I will call their home. If it is a girl, well, I'm a girl right? So if I call they think I am just a regular friend. But if it is a boy, his family might tease him, and I've made a friend very uncomfortable in the past because of this. I've also been told some nasty things by a parent. I was totally pissed off when a parent of a boy told me off like I wasn't a proper girl. So since then, I don't use the home phone.

Finally, a high school boy states his clear preference for calling a mobile phone, even if it means incurring the high costs of calling from a home to a mobile phone, which is more expensive even than calling mobile to mobile.

> Interviewer: Do you make long calls, over thirty minutes from your mobile?
> Student: Well, for long calls, I might call from my home phone to my friend's mobile. Because I don't pay for my home phone, my folks do.
> Interviewer: But you don't call your friend's home phone even in that case?

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Student. No. No way.

The space of the home, dominated by parents, accommodates youths' identity as child, but not as friend. The home phone once was a means for parents to monitor and regulate their children's relationships with their peers. One girl we spoke to described how her mother complains that she doesn't know who her friends are anymore. With the mobile phone, the spatial boundaries of the home become highly porous to discretionary communication. The spatial dispersion of homes, coupled with the freedom of communication via the mobile phone is an inversion of the dynamics of the classroom, where kids occupy the same physical space, but are not in control of their communications with each other.

I want to turn now to a discussion of how kids use mobile phone text messaging in the classroom and other spaces such as public transportation that are not amenable to voice calls. This is a lead in to the conclusion of this talk, which traces the kind of alternative, networked places that are being constructed out of mobile phone communications.

The text message function on a mobile phone allows one to send short electronic mail messages to other mobile phones and internet mail addresses. Youths are so proficient at typing messages on tiny keypads that some are faster at inputing text through their phones than through a computer keyboard. Short messages are the dominant functionality used in mobile phones for youths, far outpacing phone calls. One reason for this is that they are cheap, with each message costing about the equivalent of 2 cents. Another is that text messaging can be used as a way of maintaining peripheral and lightweight awareness and contact.

Text messaging is used when the content of the communication is not urgent, when there are constraints on the use of voice communication, or when one is unsure about whether the recipient is available for communication. The general expectation is that one should be able to return a text message immediately, as long as one is not sleeping or working. Text messages can be returned discreetly during class, on public transportation, or in restaurants, all contexts where voice communication would be inappropriate. Kids have traditionally subverted the communicative constraints of the classroom through whispers and note-passing. Now, the text messaging function in mobile phones performs this role.

Here is an excerpt from a group interview with three female colleges students where we are discussing the rhythms of shortmail use. Shortmail is one variant of text messaging.

Interviewer: When you send a short mail message, does it get returned right away?

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Student1: Yes.
Research Assistant: Shortmail usually gets returned immediately.
Student2: I generally return shortmail right away.
Interviewer: On the spot?
Student2: Usually on the spot.
Interviewer: But there must be cases when you can't answer right away.
Student2: Depending on the content. If it is a question, I return it right away. If there is a delay in my answer, I insert an apology like "Sorry for my slow reply."
Interviewer: Is it rare for you to actually make a voice connection? Is that because you worry about the toll?
Student1: That is one factor.
Student3: I worry that they might not be able to answer the phone at the moment.
Student1: If it's shortmail, it can be one way. If they are busy, they can reply later.

Interviewees described how they use text messages as a way of checking if someone is awake, before initiating a voice call. It becomes the equivalent of a long-distance glance or tap on the shoulder. Others described how they used text messages to transmit lightweight content, what they call "trivial stuff" that doesn't require a response, such as their current status: "I'm sleepy." "I'm walking up that hill to school. It's very long." This kind of message functions as a means for entering somebody's virtual peripheral vision. The recipient may or may not respond, thus initiating either a series of chat-like message exchanges, or a voice connection.

The text message uses were what I found most interesting and distinctive about youths' use of mobile media. Unlike voice calls, which are point-to-point and engrossing, text messaging is a way of maintaining ongoing background awareness of others, and of keeping multiple channels of communication open. Youths generally reported that there were only 2-5 friends with whom they have regular communication over their mobile phones. With these intimates, the volume of communication is very high, and there is the expectation that they should always be available to each other for communication. This highly circumscribed space of connectivity is in marked contrast to the theoretical possibility of communication with large numbers of others, and the number of address book entries that generally number over a hundred. There is an important sense in which text messages, combined with the capability for voice messages, inscribes a flexible but very concrete place-like awareness, a sense in which a small peer group inhabits the same ever-present communicative space. These mobile places reflect the status of youth peer relations as personally central, but lacking in legitimate spaces and times for assembly.

On a related note, Tomoko Kawamura, a graduate student that I am working with, is studying ways in which mobile phones have changed the dynamics of how people arrange and manage meetings. She is finding that there is a shift in expectation about how to handle lateness. In the past, one was expected to appear at a certain place at an appointed time, and apologies were in order when one didn't. Now, it is not uncommon to be over thirty minutes late with no apologies, as long as one is in ongoing communication over mobile phone. The current expectation is that your phone is working and on your person, and that you will transmit time sensitive status information in transit. Apologies are in order now if a phone is forgotten at home or the battery runs out, rather than because of lateness per se.

The use of text messages, and the growing expectation that mobile phones define a space of persistent connectivity, points to an alternative sort of technosocial space being defined by new mobile technologies for Japanese youths. While mobile phones have become a vehicle for youths to challenge the power-geometries of existing places such as the home, the classroom, and the street, they have also created new disciplines and power-geometries, the need to be continuously available to friends, and the need to always carry a functioning mobile device.

In case you were wondering what happened between Ran and Tatsukichi, let me return to the opening vignette.   Why is Tatsukichi absent in the mobile networked peer space? The scene cuts to Tatsukichi drying dishes at his family noodle shop. "Shit! Just because the economy sucks, why do I suddenly become a slave?! Where is my summer vacation?!" A plate goes flying off his head and his dad shouts. "You worthless son! Treat the plates with a little more respect!" Tatsukichi finishes and fishes his mobile phone out from under his work shirt, discovers Ran's message, and panics. "OH MY GOD!" And he goes running off to find her. Tatsukichi broke a peer taboo when he was not reachable in the evening by mobile phone, caught in the cross-fire of the disciplines of family and peer group. Even though a mobile phone call would do the trick, Tatsukichi sets out on a bicycle on a low-tech quest for his girlfriend, riding into oblivion until the next installment of the series, his lack of peer connectivity rendered both metaphorical and literal.

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