

## Case Study

# Analysis of Regional Social Networking Services: Community Participation and Regional Economic Revitalization in Japan <sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In Japan, an increasing number of local governments or local-based venture companies created by young entrepreneur have been operating SNSs. These services allow citizens to disseminate and exchange information freely over the internet, and there is a growing trend of local governments using this information exchange to promote resident participation and interaction. Conventional online communication between local governments and residents or between residents depends on technologies such as official internet BBs or messages from homepages which the local governments operate. However, it has traditionally been difficult for people with a shared awareness of issues to collaborate when limited to the kind of communication found within an official and one-way communication setting. When there is a communication gap and distance between local governments and residents or between residents themselves, it is difficult for local governments to involve normal residents in the regional policy process. It was found from the case study that community participation requires informal or casual communication between citizens through SNSs. With a common practice of writing diaries, casual communication based on regular life can help residents become involved in the regional policy process, and gather and share information about their areas.

**Keywords:** Social Networking Services (SNSs), Community Participation, eGovernment, casual communication

## 1 Introduction

The Japanese government has been planning the e-Japan Strategy since 2000, which has now been launched into the second phase. It is a comprehensive system covering seven areas: medical services, food, lifestyle, small and medium enterprise financing, knowledge, employment

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and labour, and public services. One of the main issues in the area of public service is to construct an e-government system and have citizens involved and utilize it. However, very few people use the resident registration services online.

On the other hand, the increasing number of users of new internet communication tools, such as Blogs and SNSs (Social Networking Services), is drawing the attention of various fields. Recently a growing number of local governments or local NPOs (Non-profit organizations) have also been introducing SNSs. These services allow citizens to disseminate and exchange information freely over the internet, and there is a growing trend of local governments using this information exchange to promote community participation and interaction.

Web 2.0 will have an impact on local communities. Governmental committees are holding discussions on the role of local communities in the era of Web 2.0.

We focus on the emerging movement of regional SNSs by Web 2.0. We introduce some successful cases where residents or local government are allowed leadership roles in networking in their area, and good relationships between the two are established.

Japan has one of the lowest birth rates in the world. In an aging society, it is necessary to create opportunities for senior citizens to play a more active role in communities. Regional SNSs promote participation of seniors in community and volunteer activities.

## 2 Objectives

The first objective of this paper is to analyze the effect of introducing and utilizing regional SNSs with resident participation, and to prove the close relationship between SNSs and regional revitalization. The effect of regional SNSs has yet to be studied, let alone revitalization by citizen's collaboration through SNSs. The facts and background of local governments introducing SNS have been reported, but the mechanism of participation, communication and collaboration is still unknown.

Conventional online communication between local governments and citizens depends on technologies such as internet BBs or messages from homepages. However, it has traditionally been difficult for people with a shared awareness of issues to collaborate when limited to the kind of communication found within an official and one-way-communication setting.

The second objective is to classify Japan's regional SNSs into several groups. Almost all Japanese prefectures have SNSs which are created by public bodies and NPOs, and some prefectures utilize several different SNSs. We classify these SNSs through the viewpoint of development, content, geographical conditions, and sequences of communication and participation.

## 3 Case Description

Our case study deals with two regional SNSs: one in Yatsushiro-city (Kumamoto prefecture), and one in Chiba-city (Chiba prefecture). The former is a pioneer of regional SNSs which has been developed by a city officer. This SNS has served as a catalyst, triggering the introduction of SNSs in other regional communities. The latter is a small-scale SNS, but participants, irrespective of age or sex, discuss regional problems, hold events, engage in volunteer activities with children, and gather citizen's opinions and send them to the local public bodies.

We focus on three points: (1) why regional SNSs can create an atmosphere of harmony, (2) what are possible uses of SNS for eGovernment, and (3) how key persons behave in the SNSs, and what are the key components for community participation.

### 3.1 Pioneer of Regional SNS: A local government Yatsushiro's "Gorotto Yacchiro" SNS

The "Gorotto-Yacchiro" SNS has been operated since October 2004. "Yacchiro" is the dialectic of Yatsushiro, a city in Kumamoto prefecture. Originally, the city's official site maintained a BB (bulletin board) to seek the views of residents. However, some serious problems

were raised, such as the decreasing number of visitors to the site and number of opinions or comments posted. The city government thought that the site would be meaningless if it was inconvenient for residents. The government has a responsibility to help and reuse information in the city, and give benefits back to the citizens. When the site was renewed, it was accompanied by the introduction of a SNS by the government.

The SNS includes functions that allow residents to write blogs freely and upload pictures, as well as confirm maps, health-related issues, and information concerning elections and natural disasters and etc. Even if the main site is unavailable in times of disaster, residents can get information from others' diaries on the SNS.

### **3.1.1 Administration of the Gorotto-Yacchiro SNS**

A city officer developed the Gorotto-Yacchiro SNS. He was familiar with a hobby-related SNS called mixi, which is the biggest SNS in Japan with over 8 million users. He thought this kind of communication, where users can post diaries, send messages to other users, make communities, visit other users' pages, share information and etc., could offer effective communication for residents in local communities.

### **3.1.2 Utilizing the regional SNS to participate in politics**

The Yatsushiro city local government has been planning demonstration experiments for disaster information networks on the SNS. In regional SNSs, users can write about regular life from a community-based point of view. In a time of disaster, users can write about their circumstances or the specific disaster happening to them.

People tend to be thrown into a panic when a disaster occurs, and information can become disrupted. With a common practice of writing diaries, however, casual communication based on regular life can help residents gather and provide information whenever a disaster might occur. In fact, when a regional flood happened in July 2006, residents visited the SNS and gathered information regarding dangerous areas and promoted awareness among each other.

Yatsushiro city is also planning a demonstration experiment for an earthquake.

## **3.2 Revitalization of local towns: “Shin-kemi Gang” SNS**

Shin-kemi-gawa is a name of station, and the Kemi-gawa river runs near the area. The Shin-kemi Gang SNS was established in January 2006 as an invitation-based system, and currently (as of April 2007) there are 20 core members. These 20 residents belong to Salon Hanazono, which is a face-to-face study group. This study group has been operating since 2005.

The core members discuss child-rearing, regional security, and local administrative affairs, as well as hobbies or trivial daily matters. They participate in politics through discussions on the SNS.

### **3.2.1 Administration of the Shin-kemi Gang SNS**

The operators of this SNS are four women primarily between the age of 30 and 50. They all have had the experience of staying in foreign countries, and they can all consider regional interests as a whole from a wide point of view. According to our interview, one of the members said they could not have such coordinated activity without their rich experiences abroad.

Unlike Gorotto-Yacchiro, this SNS cannot be accessed without an invitation from a user. Existing users decide whether or not potential users are acceptable into the SNS. This approval system builds strong ties among users. The SNS's 20 members include company workers, university students, self-employed individuals, a city council member, an ex-councilor, full-time housewives, and so on. They all have a nodding acquaintance with each other.

### **3.2.2 Utilizing the regional SNS to participate in politics**

Members of the Shin-kemi Gang SNS have been active in political involvement. We explore two cases where the residents participated in the local policymaking process.

The first example is regarding the construction of a community facility. When the local government decided to construct a new local event hall in 2006, the members wondered about the cost-benefit of the construction and started activities to determine whether or not to approve the plan. Because there were enough local halls in the area that were barely-used, they thought that more lavish spending was unnecessary.

First, they tried to spread awareness of the plan among residents, and discussed what kind of local hall was desirable. Second, they conducted a questionnaire survey to grasp the residents' opinions, so that the local government would reflect these opinions in the policymaking process. Third, they displayed the results on the internet.

The second example is regarding the quadrennial unified local elections. In April 2007, when quadrennial unified local elections were held, they sent open letter questionnaires to the candidates and again displayed the results on the internet.

This was the first time that the candidates' statements or policy plans could be seen as tabulated results and residents could compare them for voting. While not all of the candidates have answered the questionnaire, this project helped some local residents to think about local politics by comparison.

The SNS users call this event a practice of eDemocracy.

### **3.2.3 Utilizing the regional SNS to revitalize local area**

Members of the Shin-kemi Gang SNS have a collective desire to revitalize the local area. Japan has a rapidly aging population, and this area is no exception. These members have conceived a plan to make a local shopping street active and quickly correspond to consumer needs.

They thought to start something new on the local shopping street, and decided to introduce a regional currency which had been used in a neighboring area that also has regional SNS called "Amippy". Personal contacts have been growing between members in the Shin-kemi Gang and Amippy.<sup>2</sup>

## **4 Classification of Regional SNSs**

Following the success of the Gorotto-Yacchiro SNS, the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications has conducted two demonstration experiments for regional revitalization and disaster information networks in two different local areas since 2005: One in Chiyoda-ku (Tokyo) and one in Nagaoka-city (Niigata-prefecture). These two SNSs co-hosted several events and invited residents from each area. Each area also has its own local specialty.

Since that time, in addition to local governments, non-profit organizations and local enterprises have also started to operate regional SNSs with OpenPNE, which is open source and a Social Networking Service Engine written in PHP.

The reasons and purposes for starting regional SNSs are classified into several models. The primary purposes are to promote citizen participation in politics, the creation of strong information networks for disaster and crime prevention, communication among residents, support for community activities, and the development of local enterprises and tourism. NPOs are more active in starting and operating regional SNSs than local governments.

The way of communication is different among each SNS. While Gorotto-Yacchiro shows a neutral attitude from a public position, the Shin-kemi Gang insists on strong ties with its approval system. Like the Shin-kemi Gang, a large number of regional SNSs are inclined to have strong ties among users with a sense of security. A sense of security excludes residents of other areas from registering in the SNS itself. Many regional SNSs open up user registration irrespective of residence so that not only local residents but also residents in other areas can join the

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<sup>2</sup> The effect of introduction of regional currency in this area has not been analyzed yet, however, we realize its necessity.

communication. On the other hand, SNSs that control user registration can cover community-oriented information thoroughly.

Figure 1 shows a classification of Japanese regional SNSs based on two axes: area and strength of user connections.

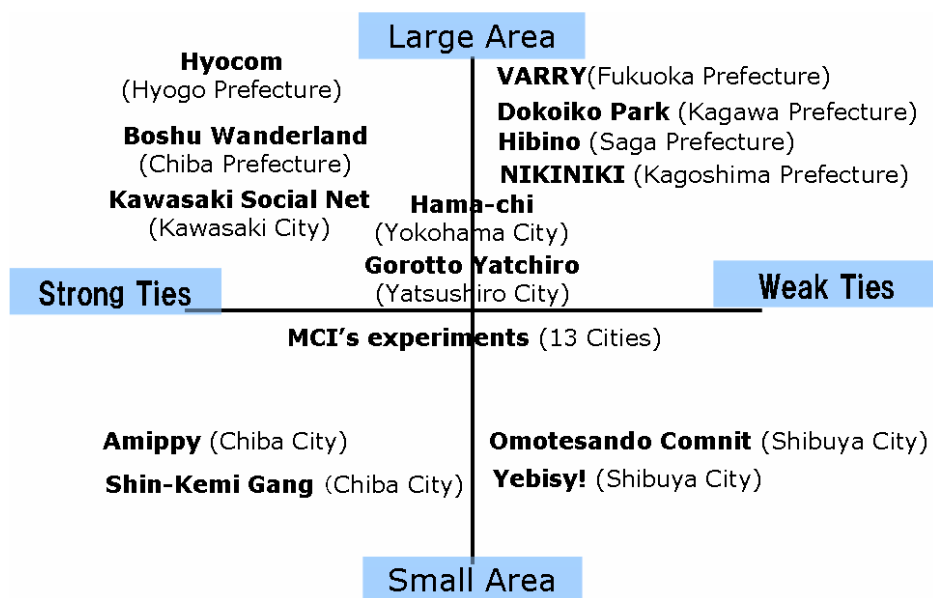


Figure 1: A classification of Japanese regional SNSs based on two axes: area and strength of user connections (see e.g. Figure 1).

## 5 Conclusions and Recommendations

It was found from the case studies that community participation requires informal communication between citizens through SNSs. Minetaki and Yoshida (2006) showed that SNSs provide a more caring environment compared with face-to-face communication. Therefore, local public bodies should introduce and utilize SNSs so that citizens can join in and communicate freely.

### 5.1 Why regional SNSs can create an atmosphere of harmony

In regional SNSs, compared with hobby-oriented SNSs such as MySpace or Mixi, residents can fully engage in stimulating conversation about regional matters with those who share common awareness of the issues. Through the process of discussing and seeking solutions for regional-specific issues in the SNSs, residents exchange not only problems but also feelings of local pride in words of their own. Most of blogs in regional SNSs are written in dialect.<sup>3</sup>

### 5.2 What are possible uses of SNS for eGovernment

As in the way Gorotto-Yacchiro SNS has been providing demonstration experiments for disaster information networks, regional SNSs offer easy-to-use services to residents in times of earthquakes or other disasters. Since users can write about regular life from a community-based point of view, they can write about their circumstances or the specific disaster happening to them. With a common practice of writing diaries, casual communication based on regular life can help

<sup>3</sup> Tokyo and suburb of Tokyo metropolitan regions don't have dialect, though. The area where Shin-kemi Gang SNS covers does not have dialect, too.

residents gather and provide information. From the local government standpoint, even if the main portal site for disaster would be inaccessible or damaged, the government could offer information to residents and ascertain the circumstances, consequences of the disaster, and environments surrounding the residents.

### **5.3 How key persons behave in the SNSs, and what are the key components for community participation**

In Gorotto-Yacchiro's case, a city officer made great efforts so that each resident could put out information on the Internet. On the other hand, in Shin-kemi Gang's case 20 core members operate a face-to-face study group, and this group functions as a facilitator in the area.

As a result of the introduction of SNSs in these areas, it has been found that SNSs facilitate in fostering mutual trust, atmospheres of harmony, and residents' participation in regional activities.

Community participation requires informal communication between citizens through SNSs. When there is a communication gap and distance between local governments and residents or between residents themselves, it is necessary for local governments to try to meet halfway with a mixture of official and unofficial communication. In both cities, the local government workers make efforts as facilitators.

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