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Mark J. Mclelland, Nanette Gottlieb, eds. *Japanese Cybercultures.* New York: Routledge, 2003. 252 pp. $53.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-27919-2.

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Cyber Cypher: The Start of Japanese Web Culture

Because the theme of this edited collection changed from the coeditors' original intent, this book, according to Nanette Gottlieb and Mark J. McLelland, succeeds as a "first effort to provide an overview of aspects of the use of the Internet in Japan" (p. 1). Several years after the book's publication, many studies have been done on the Japanese Internet, but in 2003 when *Japanese Cybercultures* was published, the field had not been investigated. "Our original plan for the book," note the editors, "was to look at subcultural appropriations of the Internet by Japan's various minorities in order to assess the impact this new communications medium has had on groups and individual whose access to print and broadcast media was limited" (p. 1). This book review is needed now to show how shrewd the editors were in deciding "to broaden the scope to look at cybercultures" and to create a more basic community study of online activity. They write: "Individuals meet online to pursue a common interest or goal irrespective of whether the 'community' that develops through this interaction maintains an offline presence" (p. 1). The introduction concludes with realistic optimism. The Internet "has changed the ways in which we approach the gathering and presentation of information, and has offered both individual and groups new media for the construction of identity.... However, the Internet has not really leveled the playing field in Japan" (p. 14).

The volume remains a valid study of the introduction of the medium. For example, three chapters are dedicated to cell phone technology, which has been proven in the last few years to be the looming and alluring challenge to global development of the mobile Web. The editors also express satisfaction with the collected essays' abilities to address the connection between culture and technology. Internet use in Japan may not be unique, the editors cautiously suggest. Neither the editors nor the essays seem able to escape circular reasoning about local language. Although Internet content does exist in languages other than English, most Japanese-language pages on the Web are used mostly by Japanese people in the Japanese language.

The fifteen essays are divided into three parts: "Popular Culture," "Gender and Sexuality," and "Politics and Religion." Each essay offers extremely clear methodology that serves to illuminate a well-defined part of the Japanese cyberculture. Many authors include personal glimpses into their areas of study. As a result of these supplemental first-person insights, authors' conclusions sometimes gain a visceral credibility, as in the essay about cuteness by Larissa Hjorth, who had noticed books of manga replaced by cell phones on commuter trains: "In Japan, it is kawaii [cute] culture that has become the specific mode by particularizing and familiarizing the global space of the Internet" (p. 58). However, sometimes the authors seem too close to the subject to write clearly enough for the uninitiated, as I found in the essay titled "The Japanese Noise Alliance and the Internet."

The first chapter by noted scholar Brian McViegh contains broad background summaries: the development of the Internet in Japan, the nature of Internet research, mobile phones and identity, the reach of the Internet, discrimination and activism, and the Internet and social structures. In tone and content, it reads like an introduction, full of interesting data. But it stands apart from the collection of studies and seems dated in a way that the

grounded essays do not. McVeigh describes the young people who grew up with cell phones in Japan. "While the enhanced flow of information is not in doubt [on the Internet], the assumption that such an enhanced flow somehow enhances notions of community is problematic" (p. 9). Given this cogent comment about community, it is surprising that James Beninger, seminal communication scholar of pseudo-communities, is not found in the bibliography. Although predicting future trends is dangerous scholarly ground, Junko R. Onosaka ventures, concluding that "the success of women's online organizations relies on strengthening the relationship between Internet users and the development of face-to-face activities" (p. 104). Another essayist, Joanne Cullinane, tempers conclusion with observation. The Internet provides Japan's HIV community "a relatively secure space … without having to identify themselves by name" (p. 136). Political and economic historical remarks are appropriately made by David McNeill, who, considering technology adoption within the social context, introduces some disappointment about "the expanding range of online activities and campaigns" (p. 163). Another author, Vera Mackie, approaches the creation of publics on the Internet from the administrative perspective of the Koizumi administration. She provides examples, including the Koizumi e-mail magazine, which "makes only limited use of the interactive possibilities of the Internet" (p. 187). Isa Ducke delineates in a blow-by-blow report, in the terms of the essay's title, "Japan's 2001 History-Textbook Affair." She balances commentary ("While effective in mobilizing opposition to the Tsukurukai text, there were clear limitations to the group's Internet use") with self reports ("The group judges its use of the Internet to be 'very effective' ") (p. 210).

As a whole, this book finds that the Internet does not free users from social structure. "The Internet is likely to have little substantial impact on existing social constructs of discrimination and stigmatization for the foreseeable future" (p. 13). This statement in the introduction is stronger than in any individual essay. The book provides history, observation, and theoretical insight accessible to scholars and students of the Internet in Japan and worldwide. The field of Internet research is a discipline in itself, and how to do Internet research is as much a part of the book as the content about Internet usage in Japan.

The weak point of the book is its modest uncertainty over generalizability of studies of the Japanese Internet. Indeed, when all of Japan is used by some Western Internet companies as a laboratory, the validity of observation cannot be doubted; however, it seems difficult to generalize academically from observations in Japan to the rest of the world.

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