The Upper House Election 2010 and the Social Media of Japan

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1. After the Upper House Election 2010

The 22nd Upper House Election was held on July 11, 2010. The ruling coalition secured 44 seats out of all the reelection seats, and the opposition parties (including 51 seats of LDP, Liberal Democratic Party) secured 77 seats, meaning crushing defeat for the ruling coalition. In less than a year after the change of government, the ruling coalition failed to gain majority in the Upper House. People's disappointment in the DPJ, also known as the Democratic Party of Japan, rather than the favorable wind to the LDP lead to this outcome. Chaos looms in politics of Japan.

A major change is taking place in the in media, which is a stage in the election “theater”. In this paper, I will report a new relationship between the election and the media, using the results of the survey that I have conducted on July 12, a day after the election.

2. The types of media people got information from

■ Diversification and convergence of the media and information of the election

The election is like a festival. A news flash of the results of the vote-count ignited enthusiasm in people at the finale of the festival, the voting day. The interesting observation in the last election was that these special TV programs do not close in TV, but interconnect with various information channels. For example, in the NHK's news flash of the results of the vote-count, the screen showed various channels including TV-General, BS1, Radio-1, and FM, all related to NHK, and also showed phrases such as the internet and mobile phone. Other TV stations also worked-out various programs, including digital broadcasting as well as Twitter.

On the internet side, there were many trials. "NICONICO LIVE", which is a live broadcasting media using the internet, performed net exit polls, after the Lower House Election in 2009. After the vote count was completed, “NICONICO LIVE” put a live talk show with Takafulmi Horie, Hiroyuki Nishimura, Takashi Uesugi, Nobuo Ikeda, and the members of the Diets as guests, hosted by Koichi Kakutani. The “mainichi.jp” provided the election results. This program was broadcasted from 19:50 of July 11 to 01:16 of July 12, accessed by 149,518 people with comments as many as 1,039,074.

The ustream, another live internet media,
broadcasted a live discussion program of disputants and politicians, hosted by Takeshi Takano and Yoshitsugu Tanaka, both journalists. This program was sponsored by “Infoseek Naiyu-Gaikan”, and was accessed by 59,728 people. Similarly on the upstream, the Nippon Cultural Broadcasting put a live program “7/11 Upper House Election Special News Flash” titled “Ronboo’s Election Club: Please share us your real thoughts and comments with us!”

Based on the movement of the media convergence described above, the importance of the internet as a media is increasing rapidly. Figure 1 shows the percentage of people who believe that internet was “important” or “fairly important” source of information in this election. The graph shows that people in their 20’s and 30’s believe that the internet is more important than the newspaper.

Fig. 1 Importance of the media in the election felt by each generation (%; based on the survey by Inter-Media Society Research Group, on July 12, 2010)

I asked people “What did you use as a source of information in this election?” Percentage of the news sites such as Yahoo! or Infoseek stride out. This may be somewhat due to reason that the survey was done on the internet.

On the contrary to the above observations, the newspaper’s power of providing information has not necessarily declined, because these web sites utilize news service from newspapers. This means that present media do not have a structure where different types of media are confronting each other like “TV vs. newspapers vs. internet”, but has a structure where each of them are complementing one another like “TV and newspapers and internet”. I would like to call this media environment an “Inter-Media Society”.

Fig. 2 Information sources at the election (%: only media in the top ranks are shown, based on the survey on July 12, 2010)

3. Political activities using the internet: election in the Inter-Media Society

- Election information from internet

Let’s look into the internet trend, in more detail. Other than news sites, which already gained many users, there are emerging new services such as large bulletin board system, blogs, SNS (Social Networking Service), and mini-blogs such as
Twitter. These are called “Social Media”, and their characteristics are in the capability to provide communication environment based on the virtual community. It is said that these social media strongly influenced Obama’s win in the presidential election of US, in 2008.

Video communications on the internet are also active in recent years. Video hosting services, such as YouTube, are already using information from TV programs (for example, “Scoop! Contribute together Videos” of NHK). Other than these services, there are new services in which people can make their own video clip and broadcast it live by themselves, such as Nikoniko video service and ustream. “Jigyo-shiwake”, which sort out government businesses to defeat wasteful ones, and which was almost the only political activity by DPJ that succeeded in gaining people’s support, was broadcasted live using the internet, which contributed to its popularity.

In Figure 2, web sites by political parties or by Diet members have made their place in the top ranks, as popular information sources for the election. Internet is a suitable media for political parties or Diet members to appeal their political ideas, since it costs very little. Furthermore, internet can be used by citizens to promote their activities or personal opinions. Thus, possibilities of obtaining information or gaining your place in the election campaign have increased dramatically thanks to the internet. Development of social media or video hosting services, described above, accelerated this movement. In this year’s election, various independent election web sites, such as “Yahoo! Everyone’s Politics”, “Rakuten Love Japan”, “Google Vote for the Future”, “JANJAN The Election”, or “e-Politics”, provided information on the election. Now we can access various kinds of information.

The election web sites, such as “Yahoo! Everyone’s Politics” or “Rakuten Love Japan”, started a service to mediate small amount of political donations to candidates. This service enables candidates without campaign funds to collect money. Even a candidate, who does not have sponsorship from large companies, now has the opportunity to become a politician.

The voting rate among the young generation has always been and is still only half of that of aged generation, as shown in Figure 3. It is expected that by using the internet to provide information on the election, we can get more young people to be interested in the election.

![Fig. 3 Voting rate for each generation in the recent national elections (source: Association for Fair Election Promotion)](image)

Web sites where people can enjoy the election as if they are playing computer games are being built one after another. Examples are: the site “Shugi.in” (http://shugi.in/), where you can virtually participate in shugi-in (Lower House Election), and “Vote Now” (http://agilemedia.jp/lets_vote/), which gathers Twitters on the election. It is expected that these projects will raise the interest in politics among young people.
Political activities on internet

It is quite common nowadays for Diet members to have official web sites. There are many Diet members who became famous by utilizing social media.

A Diet member who is good at using Twitter is called “Twitter Diet member”. Diet members, such as Seiji Ousaka and Kenzo Fujimatsu, are famous “Twitter Diet members”. Ousaka is famous for using Twitter to broadcast the debate between party leaders live at the Diet held on July 2009. Interactive communication in politics may attract people to the actual political events, such as speech meetings.

In the US, President Obama is famous for using Twitter, and he has attracted more than 5 million followers up to now (Obama says that he has not contributed by himself).

In Japan, the former Prime Minister Hatoyama started Twitter just after he took office, attracting nearly 700,000 followers. It got into the news when Hatoyama said that he would re-follow. To act against the Hatoyama’s Twitter, Tanigaki, the President of LDP, said “I followed Hatoyama’s Twitter” before the start of debate between Hatoyama and Tanigaki, held on April 2010. This topic also got in the news as it attracted a lot of attention.

The web site “Politter” (http://politter.com) was opened, which shows the list of Twitter Diet members, with their “murmurs (contributions)”. We may to able to prospect the future of Japan’s politics, by watching the topics on this site. Politicians, not interested in the “actual voices of people” expressed in the Twitter, may have difficulties to be successful.

There are other political activities that we can do using the internet. Virtual space “Ameba Pigg”, operated by a server agent, provides various opportunities to political activities. Examples are: establishing a special area called “Our Wishes to Politics Forum”, where we can discuss or share our idea on politics by presenting can be held; the distribution of the virtual item “Let’s Vote Badge”; and an open forum participated by Diet members and candidates. In this open forum, Diet member Fujimatsu and a candidate Junko Mihara participated, and Mihara won the election.

The obstacle named the Public Offices Election Act

Currently in Japan, the providing of information on the election using the internet is strictly restricted. This is because the Public Offices Election Act, which is the rule for fair election, was established in 1950, when people were not expecting this kind of situation on media that we have now. In this law, updating information on the election during campaign period is prohibited whether it is done by candidates, supporters, or by citizens. This restriction is more sever than that of other foreign countries.

There were discussions on the modification of the Public Offices Election Act, accommodating to the current media environment, within the last ten years. There was a rather strong movement of the modification of the Act, when “Research Group on the Election Campaign in IT Era” was started by the Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications, in 2001. The strict restriction on the net election was not changed, however. On May 12 of this year, there was news on the agreement between the ruling parties and opposition parties on the removal of the banning of the net election. The action in the agreement was postponed, however, because Prime Minister Hatoyama resigned.

Although the net election is not unconditionally
wonderful, restrictions that suppress people's desire to communicate or political interests must be modified as soon as possible, since internet is widely used among people.

Based on the result of survey where I asked people's opinion on the net election, most of the people feel the need to modify the Public Offices Election Act, as shown in Figure 4. The percentage of the people who are against the modification of the Act is only 20%.

4. The trends in foreign countries

The change in the media is making its progress now in Japan, but what about in foreign countries? Let's look into the movement in other countries.

■ The midterm election of US

In the US, where the internet technology originated, there are essentially no restrictions against the utilization of the media in election, and internet is widely used throughout the campaign. Obama won the election by MYBO (My Barak Obama) strategy, where various media, fused with each other, were used effectively, including the internet. The characteristics of the MYBO strategy are that it strongly connects the messages on internet with the organization of grass-root supporter's activities in the real world. After taking the office, Obama still utilizes the internet to communicate with people, and he is called "WIRED President". He has web sites in social media, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and others.

It is now the season of the midterm election in US. Every political party is actively utilizing the internet for election campaign. This is because internet influences greatly the grass-roots activities of people (grass-roots activity using the internet is called sometimes as "net-roots"). In the midterm election campaign, conservative groups who are against Obama's tax reform are active in having "tea party". In opposition to this, liberal groups are eagerly making the "coffee party" movement using the internet. The internet is main battlefield of the election.

■ Trend in France

In France, commercial newspapers became subsidiaries of the company, which is thought as near government. Therefore, criticisms against
the government are done mainly on internet news. In recent days, internet news site “Media Balt”, started by people who were reporters of Le Monde, is active in reporting on the suspicions of President Sarkozy. In opposition to this, President Sarkozy started Facebook, as a public relations tool, from around 2009. There are about 230,000 members.

■ Trend in UK

In Europe, Facebook is most popular among all social media. In UK, users of Facebook have reached 24 millions. Facebook opened the election site “Democracy UK on Facebook” (http://en-gb.facebook.com/democracyuk#!/democracyuk), at the General Election in May of this year. In this site, about 270,000 users are registered, and more than one million people joined mock vote. The debate of three party leaders was broadcasted in cooperation with YouTube, and the party leader opinions were voted using a button on the screen. The opinion of Mr. Clegg seemed to be most popular. It seems than this event changed politics into an entertainment.

■ Trend in Korea

In Korea, internet was the most important place for democratic campaign. To act against the powerful traditional media, internet news site “Oh My News” was opened in 2000, and it got supports from many users very rapidly. In the Presidential Election 2002, it is said that internet user, called “Netizens”, played a great part in contributing to the win of Roh Moo-hyun, the current president.

After that, however, the control against internet was strengthened, and access to “Oh My News” decreased rapidly, and thus political activities using internet declined to some extent.

Nevertheless, “demonstration with candles” was organized using the internet in 2008, to fight against the government’s decision to import American beef. It is said that “demonstration with candles” gathered from 5,000 to 50,000 people in 2 months.

In the general election of local governments in June of this year, the ruling Grand National Party suffered crushing defeat. The reason is that the messages from Twitter calling for people to vote raised the voting rate among the young generation significantly, especially of people born in 90's. Before the election it was expected that the Grand National Party would overwhelm.

5. The future of the social media

Media politics using the internet is the worldwide trend, as described above. We wonder if Japanese can survive this trend, because some people say “It is hard for me to communicate well with other people”, or “Japan suffers from Galapagos Syndrome”.

However, there are many trials, as described above. As shown in Figure 5, the power to influence using the social media is not small among the young generation, though the percentage of social media being used as a source of information in total is not high.

Actually, based on the result of the research by Netratings (http://www.netratings.co.jp/), Japan is collecting more than one million active blogs every month. This number is far larger than that of other Asia-Pacific countries, and Japan is “the great country in blog” in the world. Furthermore, Japan’s reach to Twitter (ratio of Twitter users against the total active internet audiences) is 16%, larger than that of US, which 10%.

By the way, based on the formal blog of Twitter (http://blog.twitter.jp/2010/06/2.html), Twitters per second reached as many as 3,283, just after the
Japan's victory over Denmark by the score of 3-1 at the World Cup Soccer 2010 in June. This number is the highest in the record book, larger than that at the moment of Los Angeles Lakers victory over Boston Celtics at the NBA Finals.

Above observations suggest that the internet will be the most important media of campaign in the next election. However, it does not seem that internet will drive out TV and newspapers completely, surviving as the only one media. It is plausible that various media will converge together, creating a new information environment (Inter-Media Society). The important thing now is how we communicate with the real world using the new information environment, or how we interconnect the new information environment with our living.

The politics in the inter-media society may be a grass-root politics using the media.

In this paper, I outlined a new relationship between the election and the media, using examples from the Upper House Election, 2010. Changes in media do not necessarily influence the politics. Any media can be a good one, or can be a bad one. It is important to raise our “political influence” by using media wisely, not being abused by media.