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Seeing the “Seeing” of Others: Conducting a Field Study with Mobile Phones/Mobile Cameras

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Introduction

Mobile phones are everywhere. There is always a mobile phone within an individual's reach, and information necessary in everyday life is now being stored inside the terminal. And the uses of mobile phones are changing the ways in which we shape and reshape our day-to-day activities. Currently, non-voice functions are becoming popular and accepted add-ons. Particularly, in Japan, with an advent of a terminal with a photo mail function (launched in November 2000), we began to communicate through exchanging photos over mobile phones. Because of the convenience of taking, sending, and publishing the photos, the use of mobile phones, as cameras, may increase one's opportunity to generate “life documents” (Plummer, 1983, 2001) within a sequence of daily events.

In the context of developing a qualitative research method, a mobile phone with a photo mail function can be understood as a new device for conducting field studies, because it enables us to record and compile diverse standpoints as a set of photos. Especially, it can capture a series of micro-moments embedded within an individual's day-to-day activities.

A New Mode of Photo Taking

According to the survey (N=2,308) by Mobile Content Forum (2005), approximately 90% of all the respondents had terminals equipped with a camera function. Among them, 13.3% of the users answered that they use their cameras on a daily basis, while 60.6% of them use the cameras occasionally. Thus, nearly 75% of them are actually using the cameras on their terminals. The same survey asked what kind of photos people take with their cameras on the mobile phones. Respondents were allowed to give multiple answers, and 49.4% of them said “scenery,” followed by “family” (37.5%), “friends and acquaintances” (35.9%), and “use it as visual memos” (34.9%).

Another survey found that “recording and commemorating interesting or unusual things in everyday life” is regarded as one of the major usages of cameras

attached to their mobile phones (see japan.internet.com, 2003). It suggests that a new mode of more pervasive photo taking is emerging through the use of mobile phones (Kato, Okabe, Ito, and Uemoto, 2005), and it contributes, to some extent, to change the ways in which we record and preserve our “life documents” on a daily basis.

Given the present context, how does the use of cameras on mobile phones change our mode of knowing, especially in terms of ethnographic research method? How do they affect our communication processes, as well as our learning? Further, what are the possibilities of the mobile phones/mobile cameras to preserve and share public images of the community? In order to examine these issues, I will refer to a case of field study conducted in *Shibamata* area in Tokyo, Japan.

A Field Study in *Shibamata*, Tokyo

Background

In an attempt to explore the possible use of mobile phones for a qualitative research method, and to examine the applicability of such method for a community development, we conducted a field research in *Shibamata* area in Tokyo, Japan. *Shibamata*, located in the eastern part of Tokyo, is a temple town where traditional Japanese streets, buildings, and lifestyles are well preserved. *Shibamata* is well known for the movie titled “*Otoko wa tsuraiyo* (It’s tough being a man),” which is one of the most famous movies in Japan. Since its first episode in 1969, the movie has been released as a long-run series. That is to say, *Shibamata* area itself was in tune with the calendar of the movie production, in that director, producers, and actors/actresses, all worked there on a regular basis. Also, as the movie was on location, residents in the area collaborated in the process of its production. It has been their regular and continuous events, and the movies and the makings of them contributed to build images of the area. The series ended in its 48th episode, as *Kiyoshi Atsumi*, the leading character of the series, passed away in 1996. Since then, the area is experiencing a gradual decrease in the number of tourists and visitors. Thus, for the community members, an important issue was to somehow revitalize the area to attract more visitors, and to seek a new local-identity.

Given such context, we were asked to conduct a small-scale field survey to re-examine the charms of the area. It was expected that we will be able to (re)discover the “great good places” (Oldenburg, 1989) within the community, primarily from the viewpoint of a younger, post-movie generation. In fact, almost all the members participated did not have opportunities to watch the movie “*Otoko wa tsuraiyo*,” and did not have images or pre-understandings of the area. It was, then, the first time for most of them to visit *Sibamata* area.

Procedure

The present field study consists of three phases that are closely interrelated. As will be discussed, each phase has own emphasis in terms of our process of knowing. The design of the learning process is primarily based on the theory of experiential learning (e.g., Kolb, 1984) and grounded theory approaches (e.g., Strauss and Corbin, 1990), and it unfolds as three phases: seeing, seeing one’s own “seeing,” and seeing the “seeing” of others.

Seeing

The first phase of the study was to observe and record the area under study. On November 3, 2004, we conducted a fieldwork in *Shibamata* area, in that twenty-one students (a mixed group of undergraduate and graduate students) participated as researchers. A map of the area was distributed to the researchers, and they were asked to walk around the area by oneself or with a company, taking photos with their mobile phones (see Figure 1 for an illustration). Starting shortly before noon, the fieldwork lasted for about six hours. While strolling and discovering the sights, they were free to shop around, to stop by for sweets, or to stay at one’s favorite spot for observation.



Figure 1. Conducting a fieldwork in *Shibamata* with mobile phones (November 3, 2004).

In advance to the fieldwork, we set up a website (a weblog) for collecting and storing photos, as visual field notes. This setting may be called a “community moblog” to which registered researchers can send photos directly from their mobile phones. During their fieldwork, participants were encouraged, but not limited, to send their photos to the website. In that afternoon, approximately 280 photos were taken with mobile phones and uploaded to the site. These photos can be understood as a pile of “life documents,” with which one can begin to weave a story about his/her experiences in the area.

Seeing One's Own "Seeing"

The next phase of the study was to select and edit a pile of photos. After the fieldwork, researchers were asked to select photos, and to write a short essay to illustrate one's experience in the field. As there were twenty-one researchers, there were at least twenty-one viewpoints to observe and understand the area. In this process, one has to distanciate oneself from the situation within which he/she was embedded. It triggers a mode of self-reflection, in that one has to look back and make sense of things he/she observed during the fieldwork.



Figure 2. Sample postcards.

Then the photos and texts were organized into a set of postcards (see Figure 2 for samples). I suggest that a postcard is a handy, useful medium for presenting one's experiences in the field (Kato, 2004). Because most of the photos taken via mobile phones are stored and kept inside the terminals (Mobile Content Forum, 2005), it contributes to create an opportunity to open up the storages and convert them into a stream of personal stories. Though it is a print medium, a postcard enables us to browse multiple photos simultaneously, and thereby promote one's self-reflection. Approximately three weeks after the fieldwork, we made twenty-three kinds of postcards, altogether, each of them carrying photos and texts.

Seeing the "Seeing" of Others

The final phase involved an attempt to juxtapose and exchange different viewpoints about the area. As mentioned, each researcher's understandings about *Shibamata* area were organized into a form of postcard. A set of photos selected highlighted the objects and/or events of the area, and the texts on the back depicted one's process of understanding the area.

In doing so, we can begin to discuss about different viewpoints regarding one's environmental knowing. While looking and browsing a stack of cards, he/she will constantly construct him/herself being in the several different standpoints. This is

one of the major contributions expected from the present approach. By letting us (or forcing us) constantly change our standpoints, it eventually help us to escape from possible entrapment into one’s own way of seeing. Just as Krippendorff (1990) suggests:

Its inhabitants construct their world according to what they can see themselves doing. But the peculiarities of this world, its characteristic habitat, how well off its population is, can be seen only against the background of another world and calls for either traveling over the surrounding mountain ridge or assuming a bird’s-eye perspective from the position of which one can look into the valley from above and hence outside. An injunction against climbing and looking over the mountain ridge, expanding one’s horizon or flying to a superior position effectively prevents this self-understanding (p. 8).

By its very nature, a fieldwork allows an individual to identify oneself with a certain “character” inside the area under study. And the process of a frequent shift of standpoints may keep us from persisting in “conventional” images of the area.

Discussion

Mapping Oneself in the Field

We use a map when we needed to locate ourselves, and to specify the path that leads to our destination. Sometimes, we are not even certain about where to go, but still we use a map to understand spatial relationships between ourselves and the surroundings. The use of a map contributes to create an image of one’s location. Among many things, one of the most important things we do with a map is to gain, though often this is not consciously acknowledged, two different views. And as I will illustrate, we constantly alternate these two views in order to steer ourselves.

Environmental-View

Suppose that I am in *Shibamata*, standing somewhere on the main street, heading toward the temple, for example. What I “see” is the path that leads to the temple (see Figure 3). At this stage, I can only understand the area by a set of fragments (snap shots) of the area. This view is dependent upon a combination of at least three factors: (a) the spot I am standing, (b) the direction I am looking, and (c) the range that I can “see.” In other words, my position is situated at a specific location, and thereby what I can “see” is specified by the very nature of myself occupying a certain location. I will call this an environmental-view. From this view, I

cannot “see” what is behind myself, or, by definition, I cannot “see” what is (what seems to be) out of my range.



Figure 3. Environmental-view: What I see is a path toward the temple. At this stage, one can only understand the area by a set of fragments (snap shots) of the area.

During the fieldwork, that is the very first phase of one’s “seeing,” a researcher is thrown into the situation, and may not have a stable representation of the area. In the present case, because most of the participants visited the area for the first time, their primary focus was on taking photos with their mobile phones, and on capturing images of the town.

Bird's-Eye-View

The environmental-view is specified by the location from which one is “seeing.” That very location can be understood only by gaining an access to a bird’s-eye-view: that is to create a “map.” With a “map,” I can gain a view as if I am flying above the path that connects two nodes (see Figure 4). This view can be referred to as a bird’s-eye-view.

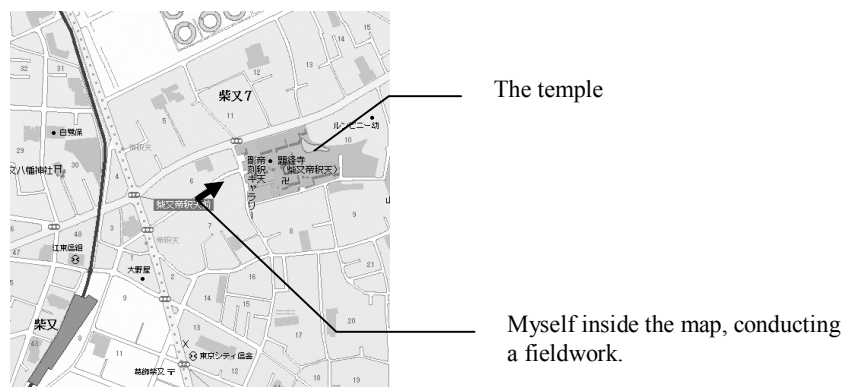


Figure 4. Bird’s-eye-view: What I can see is myself inside the map, facing the temple. At this stage, one begins to understand the spatial relationships between fragments (snap shots) of the area (from Alps Mapping K.K.; CyberMap Japan Corp).

To gain an access to the bird’s-eye-view, one has to create a map that contains him/herself, its user, of that map. During the process of selecting and editing photos, one begins to make sense of the area by understanding the relationships between fragments (snap shots) of the area. When a “map” is available, an individual can locate oneself, probably for the first time, in relation to his/her own environmental-view.

Environmental Knowing Through Mobile Phones/Mobile Cameras

As illustrated, when we read a map, we are seeing things alternately from at least two different views. In fact, without having these two views, it may not be possible to use the map. And the act of switching views is very pervasive that it is embedded into our day-to-day practices. It seems so natural that we do not make this characteristic as an issue, and we are not even sure about how we have learned the way to gain a bird’s-eye-view.

By knowing that an individual is actively engaged in alternate shifts between two different views, he/she may become aware of a set of assumptions and understandings about the life of local community. It points to the possible contributions of mobile phones/mobile cameras for a community development, for they may offer experiential learning processes. Mobile phones and their cameras may play a significant role as a “community-builder,” as a trigger to critically (re)examine the surroundings within which he/she is embedded. Hayden (1995) suggests that a socially inclusive urban landscape history can become the basis for new approaches to public history and urban preservation. As she writes:

A more inclusive urban landscape history can also stimulate new approaches to urban design, encouraging designers, artists, and writers, as well as citizens, to contribute to an urban art of creating a heightened sense of place in the city. This would be urban design that recognizes the social diversity of the city as well as the communal uses of space, very different from urban design as monumental architecture governed by form or driven by real estate speculation (p. 12-13).

As mentioned, photos compiled can be examined in terms of understanding the characteristics of the area, but more interestingly, they lead us to speculate upon multiple viewpoints of ourselves. The present exploration suggests that the use of mobile phones and postcards creates a participatory mode of knowing, creates an opportunity to reflect upon one’s ways of seeing, as well as seeing the “seeing” of others.

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