Keitai Cyborgs: The Blurring Boundaries between the Private and the Public Space in Contemporary Japan

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On the train, while walking and even while cycling: the Japanese cityscape is filled with citizens, bothyoung and old, looking at tiny glowing screens. During the last decade, mobile phones have becomenot only the main tool for phone calls, but also have become an important tool to access the Internetwith. According to the 2011 White Paper on Information and Communications in Japan, 83.3 percent of the Japanese citizens use their mobile phones to access the Internet. Compared to the statistics from 2002 this is an increase of over double as much mobile Internet users. Japan was one of the first countries to provide Internet on mobile phones and ever since its introduction in the late 1990's it has become an increasingly popular way to use the mobile phone, or keitai, as it is called in Japanese.

In this research, I will look at the ways in which the adoption of keitai Internet has influenced the concept of boundaries between the private and the public space in comparison to Internet accessed from Personal Computers. The hypothesis is that by providing access to the Internet the keitai has become a tool for the modern Japanese citizen to blur or sometimes even erase the boundaries between the intimate sphere of family and close friends and the public largely because of its portable (keitai literally means 'something carried') and intimate nature, which allows the user to physically 'melt together' with their handheld to a far greater extent than that their Personal Computer or even laptop could achieve. Already the keitai has replaced the PC when it comes to one of the main uses for the Internet: e‐mailing. More than half of the keitai carriers rather uses their keitai to e‐mail than their PC because it is always to hand and super‐easy to use. The simplicity of Internet use on a keitai even makes is easier for certain groups that usually struggle to integrate new forms of technology in their lives such as those aged over 50. The user‐friendliness helps adapting a new form of technology into their lives, hereby also shrinking the digital divide in Japan.

The tiny device, personalized on the outside by stickers and phone‐straps and on the inside by personal wallpapers, ringtones, and photographs constantly provides its user with a personal window to cyberspace. In a way this form of Internet access transforms the citizen who becomes fused with technology and cyberspace into a cyborg, barely touched by the boundaries of space and time and who is able to connect whenever, wherever with whomever. The findings of my research would help to understand our perception of public and private in the Electronic Age in new ways and renew our ideas about the modern types of Japanese Internet users.