New Media in Korea and Japan
EMERGENT TRENDS

By Damien Spry

Japan and the Republic of Korea (South Korea henceforth) have highly developed mobile and broadband Internet infrastructures and enthusiastic, innovative mobile media cultures. Japan pioneered new forms of communication and entertainment, and Japanese society still produces startling innovations in the use of technology, for example, using robots as surrogate pets and as nursing attendants. South Korea has more recently overtaken Japan and everyone else to enjoy the world's best Internet service. And Korean technology giant Samsung runs neck and neck with its rival, Apple, as the world's leading producer of smartphones.

Both societies embraced rapid technological industrialization as a means to grow swiftly into modern, successful nations. As these countries developed, new and challenging social transformations arose that have, in part, been attributed to new types of media—especially mobile, social, and locative media.[1]

Both societies embraced rapid technological industrialization as a means to grow swiftly into modern, successful nations.

Mobile

Media technologies such as television, computers, and gaming devices have miniaturized. Mobile phones—specifically smartphones—embody this. Smartphones combine significant computing power and persistent Internet with multimedia functions in a portable device. Moreover, mobile phones are always with us and are usually, if not always, turned on. The result—unprecedented in human history—is an advanced communications network, spanning almost the entire world and reachable through portable, personal devices. Japan and South Korea exemplify this "always-on" connectivity. Japan and, even more, South Korea have high rates of mobile phone ownership—like most developed countries—and both societies have highly developed mobile media environments that reflect certain characteristics of their cultures.

First, both nations have highly advanced technological industries epitomized by Japan's Sony and South Korea's Samsung, among others, that have encouraged widespread adoption of new media as a kind of techno-nationalism. Second, high usage of public transportation and long commuting times, especially in the mega-cities of Seoul and Tokyo (both serve populations over twenty million), mean that people spend a lot of time on crowded trains and buses going to and from school or work. This time is usually spent on smartphones—reading news, playing games, or chatting. Also, it is increasingly common for children to attend some organized activity like sports, music lessons, or additional classes to prepare for exams outside of school hours, often until 9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m. Under these circumstances, parents and children need to use mobile media to coordinate activities and simply to stay in touch.

The reasons that young people have—and love—mobile phones are similar in many countries. Children, somewhere usually between the ages of ten and fourteen, are given their first phone by their parents so that they can stay in touch and contact them if they are needed—especially if there is some kind of emergency or interruption in plans. This is sometimes called "remote-controlled parenthood." In Japan, where parental duties still fall disproportionately on women, it is "remote-control motherhood," whereby parents can monitor their children and manage household obligations through the use of mobile media. The reverse is "Mom in a pocket," whereby younger children can access their parents in times of distress.[2]

Source: A post on the *Wireless Watch Japan* website about a new manga camera application. http://tiny.cc/5kc5yw.

Mobile phones have also 'mobilized' most other media. Mobile TV is very common in South Korea in particular, and it is not at all rare to literally bump into someone who is engrossed in their favorite show while they are walking down the street. In Japan, mobile novels and manga (comics) have been popular for about ten years. Interestingly, the most common place to read a mobile novel is actually at home on the couch, although it is common to see subway commuters reading all sorts of material—including pornographic comics! Mobile radio is also taking off, to the extent that one popular English-language South Korean station, Arirang, does not even broadcast using radio in Seoul, relying instead on mobile users connecting via Wi-Fi or advanced telecom networks.

Social

The second trend, socialization, is evident in the popularity of social networking sites (SNS), like Facebook and Twitter, and in local SNS—Mixi in Japan and Cyworld in South Korea—which actually predate Facebook and were until recently much more popular. In South Korea, new challengers appear regularly, reflecting a Korean love of new trends.[3] KakaoTalk, a social messaging and photo sharing application, has gathered well over fifty million subscribers since its 2010 launch. The entire population of South Korea is about fifty million.
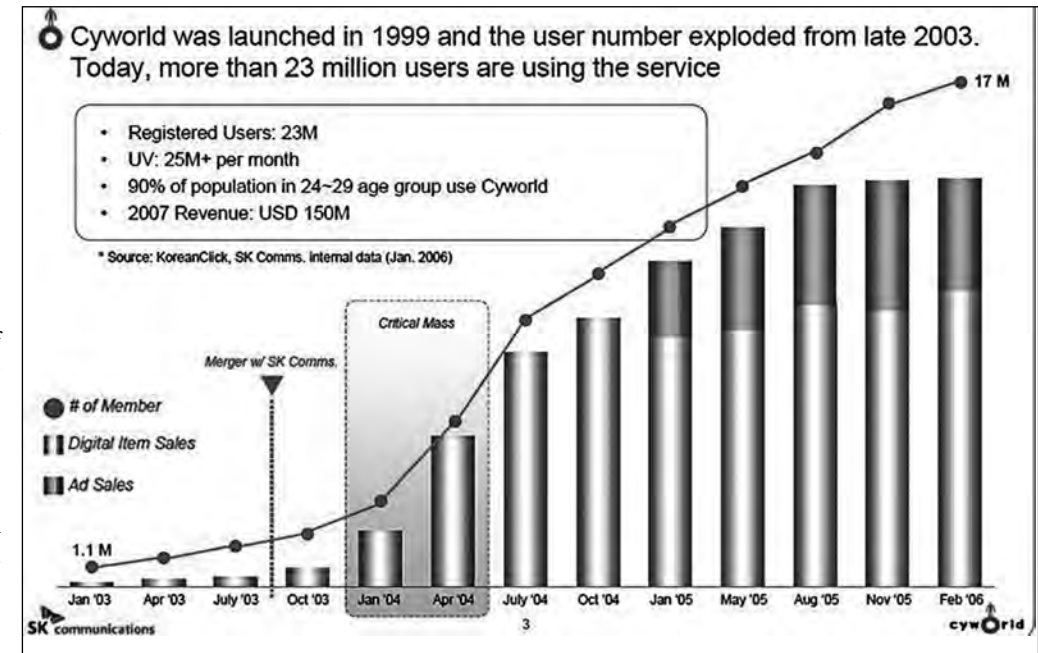
Interestingly, the popularity of KakaoTalk was instrumental in the rapid and widespread success of a cute, addictive mobile game called Anipang, a puzzle game like Bejeweled in which players move animals into lines and then watch them explode. The game was free for KakaoTalk users and had important social features. Game "lives" could be given to fellow KakaoTalk contacts, and friends could compete against one another to top weekly high-score charts. The game boomed in part because it was a shared social phenomenon and because it was an easy, quick, fun distraction during a busy commute.

In South Korea, fads come swiftly and can peak in a matter of weeks. So it was with Anipang. For a few months in late 2012, trains, offices, and prime-time TV shows were full of players of all ages and levels of expertise. Players competed in shopping malls, showcased their skills on talk shows, and even published *How-to Succeed at Anipang* e-books. But Korean trends also can disappear overnight, and so it was with Anipang. By early 2013, Anipang was more or less forgotten. KakaoTalk, however, had gathered a huge number of subscribers, and the message service now outpaces SMS and Facebook as the preferred form of text-based communication—especially among younger users.

People use social media (including social network sites like Facebook and messaging services) as important ways to develop and maintain social networks of peers. Sending messages and pictures to one another is a crucial way of deepening bonds between friends. Conversations of a romantic nature can seem more manageable for some when conducted via text; it is possible to take one's time to compose a message, and no one can see you blush! Social arrangements are also posted online, and changes happen frequently at the last minute, so being in constant contact is crucial.

Lastly, recording and sharing one's life online via social media is a way of shaping and performing one's social identity, or how we like to be seen by others. The popularity of social networking sites is based largely on these needs to share our thoughts, feelings, and actions with others.

The flip side of this is that—through mobile phones—social media users are increasingly able to monitor each other's lives, and the feeling that we are living our lives under a form of surveillance is hard to shake. In South Korea, there was a trend reflecting this: Teen girls would take a photo of one of their eyes using their boyfriend's phone and then set the image as the phone's wallpaper, giving their boyfriends the impression that their loved one always has an eye on them.

Locative

Locative media refers to media technologies and experiences that are changed by the location of the media user. Google Maps—which places us in the center of our own on-screen world and locates us in the vicinity of nearby businesses, schools, and so on—is a quintessential example of locative media. We become the center of our worlds. New mobile applications are using location data to connect smartphone owners with businesses in their local proximity. One South Korean company, MoKorea, has developed an application that locates Korean-owned businesses worldwide based on the user's location. Mokorea has 66,000 businesses listed, the vast majority of which are in the United States.

A more sinister use of locative media is the ability for our locations to be mapped when users are unaware of it. In a worrying scandal in 2004, years before locative media became commonplace, Samsung was accused of tracking activist workers using devices implanted in specially prepared mobile phones. They were trying to keep an eye on employees who were organizing a union.[4]

Cyworld was launched in 1999 and the user number exploded from late 2003. Today, more than 23 million users are using the service

- Registered Users: 23M
- UV: 25M+ per month
- 90% of population in 24~29 age group use Cyworld
- 2007 Revenue: USD 150M

* Source: KoreanClick, SK Comms. internal data (Jan. 2006)

Source: SK Telecom, http://tiny.cc/bt4ryw.

Source: App screenshot of Anipang from their website at http://tiny.cc/g14ryw.

In Japan, mobile phones designed specifically for children promote GPS tracking functions as a feature designed to reassure worried parents, and the national government promotes location-finding surveillance features as a positive aspect of developing trends in an increasingly digital society. The government named this initiative *u-Japan*.
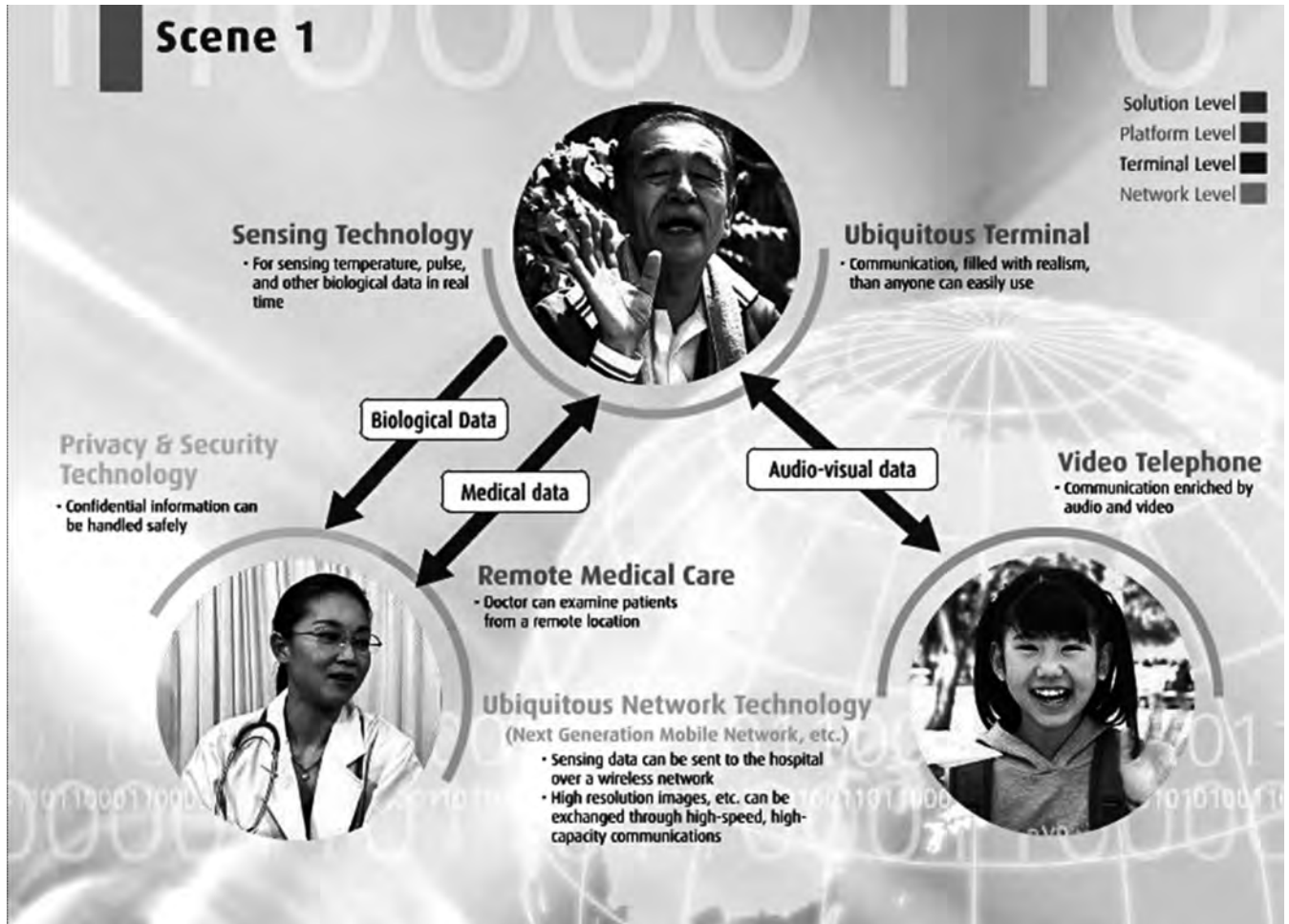
Source: Screen capture from the *u-Japan* website at http://tiny.cc/qy5ryw.

u-Japan

The *u-Japan* vision incorporates all aspects of life and seeks to make things better through the use of digital connectivity. The "u" stands for "ubiquitous," meaning "everywhere" but also refers to the idea of "ubiquitous computing," which can also be referred to as "the Internet of things." In this not-too-distant future, computers and communications devices have moved from desktops to mobile devices in constant contact with one another to be a part of objects—and even people.

This priority for full-time connectivity includes elementary schoolchildren, as explicitly addressed in the *u-Japan* online promotional material. In one particularly telling promotional video from the website promoting the *u-Japan* policy and its vision of the future, the Japanese Ministry for Internal Affairs and Communications suggests how future generations will be able to maintain social relationships at a distance while going about the fast-paced business of modern family life.

The scene shows Mrs. Tanaka, a dedicated office worker, trying to organize another hectic schedule of client demands and meetings with colleagues while worrying about the whereabouts of her daughter, Ayaka. A screen appears seemingly at will. This is an "ubiquitous terminal": Mrs. Tanaka's portal into the *u-Japan* world of connectivity and convenience. She asks the terminal to check that Ayaka is at her scheduled piano lesson. The piano school has some surprising and troubling news: Ayaka is absent. Mrs. Tanaka urges the terminal to immediately search for her. Ayaka is tracked and swiftly located in the Botanical Gardens, far from where she is supposed to be. Mrs. Tanaka straightaway connects with Ayaka, whose face appears on the screen. A surprised Ayaka answers, and a conversation begins tersely:

Ayaka: *It's you, Mommy!? What's wrong?* Mrs. Tanaka: *What do you mean, "What's wrong?" You're supposed to be at your piano lesson!*

But it rapidly becomes clear there is no cause for alarm.

Ayaka: *But today's the school field trip to the Botanical Gardens.* Mrs. Tanaka: *Oh, is that today?! I'm sorry. I'll make you a special dessert tonight. Be careful on your way home.* Ayaka: *Yes, Mommy.*

Ending the conversation, Mrs. Tanaka returns to her work. This, according to the Japanese government, is "what life will be like when *u-Japan* becomes a reality." [5]

Digital Youth

This vision of the future suggests quite a lot concerning the present hopes and fears about mobile and social media—especially those of the young. These hopes and fears arise in part because children and young people appear to be such avid and passionate users of mobile and social media. This is certainly true of young people in South Korea and Japan, at least as much as it is of other comparably developed countries.

Unfortunately, widespread use has been matched by fears of widespread misuse. There are troubling forms of social interaction via mobile and social media, such as the demands friends and significant others may have of one another. One is simply the need for constant contact and immediate response; ignoring a mobile call is considered extremely bad manners in South Korea to the extent that it is common for calls to be answered and conversations had at all times and places—even during a meal, while at the cinema, during a meeting, and so on.

More serious concerns about the impact of digital society have resulted in calls to ban mobile phone use by children. In one example from Japan, Osaka Governor Toru Hashimoto publicly led the charge to end mobile media ownership for everyone under twelve years old, pointing to private surveys and media polls that cite parental support for a ban.

In early 2008, the Department of Education in neighboring Hyōgo Prefecture had undertaken a study in response to similar concerns to those of Governor Hashimoto. These included the production of unofficial school websites; bullying and harassment; Internet dating leading to *enjo kosai* (teenage prostitution);[6] and so-called "Internet addiction" that was blamed for lack of sleep, poor scholarly performances, and declines in communicative and social skills.[7] In particular, cyberbullying and harassment were cited as being a particular problem, as were unresolved quarrels or insults traded on mobile phones, posts on Internet bulletin boards that escalated into hostility, and forms of harassment that occurred on unofficial school websites.[8] The suicide of a senior high school student in Kobe, the capital of Kobe Prefecture, in September 2007 formed part of the premise and context for the study.

Osaka Governor Toru Hashimoto publicly led the charge to end mobile media ownership for everyone under twelve years old . . .

A new set of smartphone users has also emerged as elderly people take note of the usefulness of smartphones for keeping in touch and finding their way around . . .

The subsequent report recommended approaches to education that emphasized emotional and moral learning, promoted public (especially parental) trust and confidence in the schools' roles in instructing children in morals and manners, and developed programs that are relevant according to their "stage of development." It emphasized programs that introduce and develop skills and values training for elementary school students. Much of what is recommended in the report does not differ significantly from what one might expect when generally discussing the responsibilities of ethical and considerate behavior, but it also stressed the importance of teaching children "that communication on the Internet or by email can unintentionally hurt people deeper than verbal communication."[9] The Hyōgo Department of Education that commissioned the study did not adopt the report's recommendations. Instead, it called for a ban on mobile phones in elementary schools and junior high schools.

Governor Hashimoto's determined call for a total ban of mobile phones in elementary and junior high schools in Japan was supported publicly at the national level. Ironically, one key supporter was Minister for Internal Affairs and Communication Kunio Hatoyama, who also supported the *u-Japan* approach that endeavored to make information communications technology a full-time, always-on, unobtrusive, and welcomed part of everyone's lives. But ultimately, the bans did not take effect, and levels of trust in mobile and social media seem to be growing, especially as older generations take their place in digital societies.

The Digital Aging Society

One of the most interesting trends in South Korea is the adoption of mobile and social media by older groups. Smartphone use in most countries is considerably higher by those between twenty through forty than those aged above forty, and this is true also of South Korea. However, the rates of smartphone usage rose dramatically from 2011 to 2012 among age groups forty through forty-nine (27.2–74.1 percent) and fifty through fifty-nine (10–45.5 percent).[10] In Japan, telecommunications giant DoCoMo also recognizes the potential in a hitherto untapped demographic and has targeted older customers by pushing elderly-friendly mobile phones.

In part, this increasing uptake of smartphones by older people is the result of mobile media users aging, so we should expect the age of smartphone users to inevitably rise as populations age. But a new set of smartphone users has also emerged as elderly people take note of the usefulness of smartphones for keeping in touch and finding their way around, so efforts are also being made to assist those older users who have never previously owned a mobile media device.

In the *u-Japan* vision mentioned earlier, the Japanese government has suggested how beneficial this "always-on connectivity" will be. In one example, devices implanted in pacemakers can directly alert a doctor if someone with a heart condition appears to be overdoing it while exercising. In another, an elderly couple can participate in a grandchild's birthday party live via a video screen that covers the entire wall of their home.

Telecommunications companies are also recognizing the potential customer base for their products and services and are making efforts to attract and support elderly smartphone users. Korean company SK Telecom has provided weekly seminars for their older customers to teach them how to use their smartphones to send texts and to use voice-activated functions, which are popular among those with failing eyesight. In Japan, Fujitsu has developed an award-winning smartphone designed specifically for elderly users. Called the Raku-Raku smartphone (meaning "easy-to-use"), it emphasizes simplicity and reliability.

Fujitsu's Raku-Raku smartphone.
Source: http://tiny.cc/yr66yw.

Mobile Media in North Korea

An intriguing phenomenon is the use of mobile media in North Korea, the secretive and authoritarian nation in the northern half of the Korean peninsula. North Korean mobile media users are able to call, text, take photos, read local books and newspapers, and listen to audio files similar to other countries but are confined to North Korea's intranet—a version of the World Wide Web that is restricted to North Korea and closely controlled by the regime. Nevertheless, there are close to one million mobile phone users on the official North Korean system.

Recently, foreign journalists have been allowed to post on Twitter and Instagram using a system that allows them to access the outside World Wide Web but not the North Korean web, however, the North Korean regime can reintroduce controls at any time. In 2004, for example, the government

repossessed mobile phones after an unsuccessful assassination attempt that used one to set off a bomb targeting then-leader Kim Il-Sung.

North Koreans, meanwhile, are increasingly accessing TV programs smuggled in on memory sticks, and cross-border calls are possible via Chinese mobile telecommunications networks accessed on remote mountains near the northern border. More often, North Koreans use mobile phones bought illegally from Chinese business partners—and through bribing the North Korean border guards—to conduct business and stay in touch. Mobile telecommunications towers have been established along the Chinese side of the border, suggesting that the Chinese recognize the value of the cross-border trade and the role that mobile phones play in it. North Korean mobile users sometimes let others use their phones for a fee, significantly increasing the number of people who are able to secretly call business partners or family members across the border.

This is all prohibited by the North Korea government and therefore risky. Mobile phone owners keep calls short, their phones off with the batteries removed when not in use, and speak in codes with their counterparts to arrange certain contact times. Despite the risks, the mobile phone use seems to be opening up new channels of communication for business and family relations that would have been more or less impossible—and much more dangerous— a short time ago.

Conclusion

Japan and South Korea demonstrate dominant trends in mobile phone use that are evident globally: the increase in younger and, more recently, older users; the constant connection between friends and family; and the way mobile phones have become mobile TVs, game players, radios, and much more. Also, both South Korea and Japan have embraced new ways of using mobile phones that seem to be either unique, such as Korean girls' use of wallpaper photos to "keep an eye on" their boyfriends, or perhaps a vision of the future, epitomized by the Japanese government's *u-Japan*. In North Korea, there is evidence that mobile phones can have profound effects in even the most controlled and underdeveloped communications environments. Many of these changes have been surprising; few were predicted. Only one thing is certain about mobile media: Profound change continues. Perhaps South Korea and Japan will continue to lead the way. ■

NOTES

1. Larissa Hjorth, "Relocating the Mobile: A Case Study of Locative Media in Seoul, South Korea," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 18, no.1 (2012): 1-3
2. Damien Spry, "Angels and Devils: Youth Mobile Media Politics, Fear, Hope and Policy in Japan and Australia," *Youth, Society and Mobile Media in Asia*, eds. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Theresa Dindorfer Anderson and Damien Spry (London: Routledge, 2010), 15-30.
3. Daniel Tudor, *Korea: The Impossible Country* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 139-147.
4. "Relocating the Mobile," 5.
5. Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication: Government of Japan, "What Life Will Be Like When *u-Japan* Becomes a Reality: *u-Japan* in our Everyday Lives," *soumu.go.jp,* accessed March 19, 2013, http://tiny.cc/zteqyw.
6. Enjo kosai is a practice wherein Japanese girls, usually in high school or younger, meet with (typically) older men and participate in activities like dinner or karaoke, up to and including sexual acts, in exchange for money or gifts of expensive designer goods. Aside from the concerns about minors engaging in sexual acts, reports of violence raise further concerns. Online sexual predation has more recently been moving to social networking sites. "Angels and Devils," 19-21.
7. Misa Matsuda, "Japanese Mobile Youth in the 2000s," *Youth, Society and Mobile Media in Asia*, eds. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Theresa Dindorfer Anderson and Damien Spry (London: Routledge, 2010), 31-42.
8. These sites typically include photos and commentary on colleagues, friends, and staff members of the school of those students who set up and contribute to the site.
9. "Angels and Devils," 19-21.
10. "Smart Device User Penetration Explodes in South Korea." *eMarketer,* accessed February 28, 2013, http://tiny.cc/5xeqyw

DAMIEN SPRY is a Research Associate at Hallym University in South Korea and an Honorary Associate at the University of Sydney, Australia. His research examines the impact of new and digital media on social transformation. He has conducted research and taught in universities in Australia, Japan, and South Korea (where he now resides) for ten years. He also consults for governments and in the private sector on the use and impacts of digital media on matters such as public health, social inclusion, and intercultural communication

Top left: Wall poster in North Korea announcing their first 3G mobile network in 2009.
Source: Screen capture of the YouTube North Korean news video of the launch of North Korea's first public cellphone carrier Koryolink at http://tiny.cc/fb16yw.

"Koryolink is a joint venture between Egyptian company Orascom Telecom Holding and the state-owned Korea Post and Telecommunications Corporation (KPTC) and is North Korea's only 3G mobile operator."
Source: http://tiny.cc/ldq8yw.

"North Korea's Koryolink cellular network has hit the 2 million subscriber mark, majority owner Orascom Telecom said this week. The landmark was reached in late May, 15 months after it surpassed the million subscriber mark. North Korean citizens are offered voice, text message and web browsing service on their phones, but North Korean regulations prevent them from direct international communications or Internet service. Foreigners in the country have a different class of service that allows international connectivity, but shuts off access to most domestic phone lines."
Source: *North Korea Tech* website at http://tiny.cc/vop8yw.