

The GLOCAL Conference in Asia,  
The Conference on Asian Linguistic Anthropology

# The GLOCAL 2020

Bintulu, Sarawak, Malaysia

5 - 8 February 2020

Editors: Asmah Haji Omar

Susan Needham

Nathan Hill

The CALA 2020 Proceedings Paper 16 - 4

*Language in Real and Virtual Spaces, Paper 4*

**Pleasing the ‘Bubble:’ Abe Shinzō’s Strategic  
SelfExhibition on Facebook**

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# Pleasing the ‘Bubble:’ Abe Shinzō’s Strategic Self-Exhibition on Facebook

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## Abstract

Not only is Abe Shinzō on the way to becoming Japan’s longest-serving Prime Minister in the country’s history. With more than 1 million followers on Twitter and slightly less than 600 hundred thousand fans on Facebook, he is by far the most successful Japanese political leader on social media. Commentators have described Abe’s turn to social networking services (SNS) as a “revenge” against “traditional” media against the background of a growing use of SNSs by other major Japanese political actors. At any rate, particularly through Facebook, combining text and pictures of himself on and off duty, Abe has successfully established his own mode to communicate with and “exhibit” himself to voters, citizens and the global community of netizens. This paper aims to address the following research question: on which themes and key concepts is this “presentation of the self” based? In other words, how is the Prime Minister communication staff constructing Abe’s “social” image and to which audience is this aimed? Based on Goffman’s theorization and later application of his work on the study of online social interactions, this paper illustrates the strive to ensure the consistency of Abe’s use of the SNS with previously expressed concepts and ideas (e.g., in the 2006 book “A Beautiful Country”), with the aim of pleasing the “bubble” of like-minded individuals constituting Abe’s (online) support base, and avoid issues that might possibly harm the Prime Minister’s reputation. Abe’s Facebook activity (a combination of text and pictures) during a critical time in his second tenure (2017), in which he faced cronyism allegations while coping with gaffes and scandals involving cabinet members, provided a case in point for multimedia content analysis.

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**Keywords:** Shinzō abe, Japanese politics, social network analysis.

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## Introduction

The rapid development of information technology since the 1980s and the massive diffusion of internet connectivity globally has created an unprecedented “espace citoyen” where the citizens’ “voice can rise at any moment” (Rodotà 2004, 4).

Conversely, the Internet has proven a useful means for politicians attempting to establish a “direct link” with the citizens. In particular, the massive diffusion of mobile Internet connections and the use of social networking services (SNS) has, on the one hand, favored the strengthening of certain democratic values, by, for instance, enhancing news consumption online and, to some extent, civic participation (Fenton 2012, 123; Gil de Zúñiga and Shahin 2015, 80). However, this transition has reshaped the role of politicians, that, thanks to SNS, have relinquished their traditional function of news sources to become media producers (Ekman and Widholm 2015). SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter, in fact, grant more autonomy to the communicator, as it is him who decides what and with whom to communicate.

This largely depends on the way in which social links are formed. Individuals tend to build personal relations with others based on a number of factors. In particular, what is relevant for the present discussion of political communication through social networking sites such as Facebook is the homophily hypothesis, that is, SNS users tend to build social clusters, or “bubbles” based on ethnicity and age are important components of what is referred to as baseline homophily, or life satisfaction, ideology, and organizational affiliation. Being arbitrary factors, these are in fact more decisive in further social clustering and, therefore, in information circulation (Gil de Zúñiga and Shahin 2015, 83; Hogan 2018). These social formations that Rojas call egocentric public, as the individual perceives to be at its center, are in between neighbourhood-like small communities and mass communication. On the one hand, they transcend specific spatial boundaries; on the other, being networked constituted act as filters for “system-level information” disseminated by the mass media, serving as “editors” (Rojas 2015, 95-97).

As in many other countries of the world, the diffusion of mobile Internet connections and SNSs in Japan in the second half of the 2000s has brought about changes in political communication (Tsuda et al. 2013; Nishida 2015). Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzō’s use of its personal Facebook page in time of crisis in 2017 is a case in point. According to a recent survey by Social Insight (2019), a social media analysis portal, he is currently the most popular public figure on Facebook (FB) in Japan with 590.995 followers and slightly less than 4600 friends (Facebook 2019). This paper aims to answer the following question: how has PM Abe as both a private and public individual presented himself on the SNSs at a critical time in his political career?

For politicians, SNSs structural features illustrated above offer several advantages in so far as they provide a more extensive control on their own narrative and its distribution than the mainstream media (Fenton 2012, 125-126). The intermittences typical of representative democracy are no longer at stake. In their attempt to gain “consensus at all costs,” politicians have borrowed communication models from advertising opting for immediacy (perceptions and emotions) over long term programs in order to bend their messages in relation to different audiences. The barriers between the private and the public spheres cease to exist. Meanwhile, politicians become nothing more than “goods” manufactured and consumed (Rodotà 2004, 25-26). Thus, the issue of self-presentation through SNSs has assumed greater importance for politicians at all levels. Drawing upon Goffman’s *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, scholars have identified patterns in the construction of an “electronic self” (Miller 1995; Papacharissi 2002; Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013) often detached from the real self (Papacharissi 2002).

As opposed to everyday life situations, the online presentation of the self allows for more careful control of all the expressions that are usually given off through nonverbal communication. In fact, even though nonverbal communication online is possible, this can be more easily manipulated and, thus, more effectively managed (Papacharissi 2002, 644). An important factor in Goffman’s theorization is that the dramaturgy linked to the presentation of the self is bounded by space and time (Hogan 2010, 378). These boundaries cease to exist on social media. Specifically, Hogan (2010) defines the presentation of the self on SNSs in terms of an exhibition. As opposed to performances, exhibitions do not require real-time interactions among the actors, nor do they

involve the presence of a specific addressee. Furthermore, exhibitions are curated, that is, involve a third party that provides services like filtering, ordering and searching (Hogan 2010, 381).

## Abe's Exhibition of the Self

In light of the above-mentioned considerations, this article aims to shed light on how PM Abe as both a private and public individual has presented himself on the SNSs at a critical time in his political career. Although it is true that exhibitions transcend time-space boundaries and specific target audiences, the timing of exhibition of a specific item, particularly when a public personality does it, is worth analyzing.

In order to do this, an observation of the Japanese PM's FB 2017 timeline has been carried out. The choice of 2017 as a case study is not coincidental. Throughout the year, Abe found himself under the pressure of public criticism and despite a cabinet reshuffle decided to call a snap election in October. In fact, the Japanese cabinet was hit by a series of scandals that caused a steep fall in the cabinet's approval rate and forced LDP senior members to initiate discussions on a feasible post-Abe (Maeda 2017). On top of this, the PM found himself directly involved in at least two of the scandals erupted during 2017: the Moritomo Gakuen and Kake Gakuen "twin" scandals (Carlson and Reed 2018).<sup>1</sup> This investigation has been carried out by combining content and visual analysis of Abe's Facebook entries. Content analysis enables to detect through coding and categorizing text elements to identify main points and ideas expressed by the participants in a research and underlying themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Erlingsson 2017; Neuendorf 2017). However, visual analysis, following Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), sheds light on the social function of visual communication, thus enabling to better describe the "conceptual relations between the people, places and things depicted in images" and between their producers and viewers (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006, 114).

One important feature of SNS is multimediality. In particular, the presence of different kind of texts (textual, photographic and so forth), facilitates the identification of the key ideas underlying one FB post (s. Neuendorf 2017). In addition, these materials are dated and, on some occasions, located in space. This helps researchers triangulate the data and identify traits and motives behind what the political leader publicly displays (Winter 2005, 567).

### *Merging the Public and Private Spheres on Facebook*

Abe's "private" profile is directly linked to the official Cabinet Office (*kantei*) profile. Both pages are managed by the Cabinet's PR Bureau (*naikaku kōhō shitsu*). Abe's private profile, instead, was started in early 2012, months before Abe became Japan's Prime Minister for the second time in his career and is supposed (though very unlikely) to be managed by the PM himself. In the pictures, however, he is often a represented participant, rarely an interactive participant (as apparent producer of the content) and never both the interactive (as the producer) and represented participant (e.g., in selfies taken by himself).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, Abe had to defend himself from allegations of favoring two private educational companies in the purchase of public soil for the building of a new elementary school (Moritomo) in Osaka and in the concession of a licence to open a Veterinary Medicine Faculty in a designated special economic zone (tokku) in Ehime Prefecture (Kake).

<sup>2</sup> Of the 169 posts appeared in 2017, only 68 bear an indication that the content has been designed by the kantei staff. Some pictures might actually have been posted by the PM himself (for instance, a picture of a cherry tree branch full of white cherry blossoms from early April 2017 or a picture of a bamboo sprout growing in the Official residence of the PM) as they bore no indication that they had been posted by a secretary nor were they centered around the PM's figure.

In general, Abe's FB Timeline is used mostly to sponsor Abe's public activities in his double function of PM (in particular foreign diplomacy), and leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

Abe's 2017 Facebook timeline is populated with pictures of him at bilateral meetings with peer foreign leaders (Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald J. Trump above all) or at multilateral summits across three continents (like the UN General Assembly, the G7 in Taormina, the G20 in Germany, the ASEAN in the Philippines). The Japanese Prime Minister is also depicted in disaster-hit areas consoling displaced citizens affected by floods in South-Western Japan. Moreover, in particular in October, he is also followed in his electoral activities as leader of the LDP, upon his decision to dissolve the Diet and call snap general elections in late September. In this sense, the page works as a loudspeaker for the other official profiles. Personal or more intimate moments are rare and, in any case, related to Abe's official role.

The graph in figure 1 present the results of the analysis conducted on Abe's FB timeline based on the content of the posts for the considered time period. The posts have been labelled based on the main macro-theme, i.e. "diplomacy" in case of missions abroad or meetings with other state leaders, or "action" when the PM's activities are related to domestic duties. The graph clearly shows a preponderance of "diplomacy" posts.

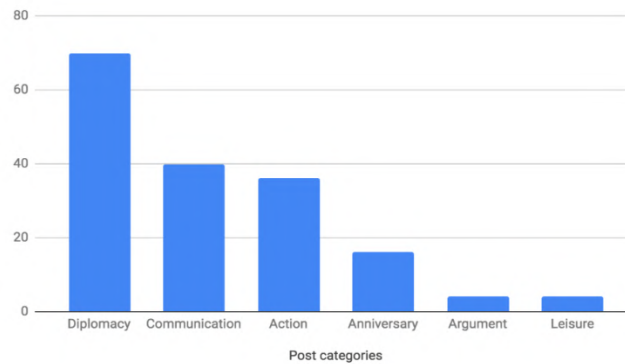


Figure 1. Themes in Abe's posts on Facebook in 2017  
Source: Facebook 2017

Diplomacy is followed by communications directed to the domestic audience (Communication), posts dedicated to the PM's actions and activities in Japan (Action), to annual or recurrent events to which the PM takes part (Anniversary), and, to a much lesser extent, to arguments with political adversaries (Argument) and moments of relax and leisure (Leisure). Even though Diplomacy is the dominant theme, the managers of the PM's FB profile shape these contents in a way that combines with the officiality (i.e., the official pictures and videos diffused by the *kantei*) and reflects the point of view of the page owner.<sup>3</sup> This is represented in Fig. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Two pictures announcing the PM's arrival in India and Vietnam taken from inside the PM's aircraft, for instance, as well as other "backstage" photos depicting Abe with other world leaders, in quite informal contexts, are designed to represent the actual PM's point of view and provide a sense of intimacy with the viewers.

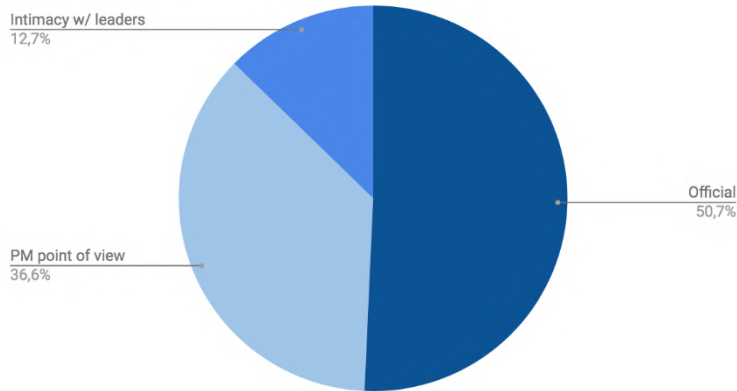


Figure 2. Showing Abe's Diplomatic Efforts on FB  
Source: Facebook 2017

### *Abe's Online Conservatism and the Strive for Acceptability*

Looking in detail at the keywords used in Abe's posts, as one might expect, *Nippon* 日本 is the most recurring one, followed by *kitachōsen* 北朝鮮 (North Korea) and *heiwa* 平和 (peace). Fig. 3 puts the keywords' occurrence in relation to the average reactions – that is, the total number of likes, dislikes, happy or angry reactions and so forth – on the posts containing them. Based on the principle of “homophily” that guide the network formation on SNS (see above), it is not surprising to note that the posts citing *dentō* 伝統 (tradition) and *rekishi* 歴史 (history) rank first and second in terms of average number of reactions.

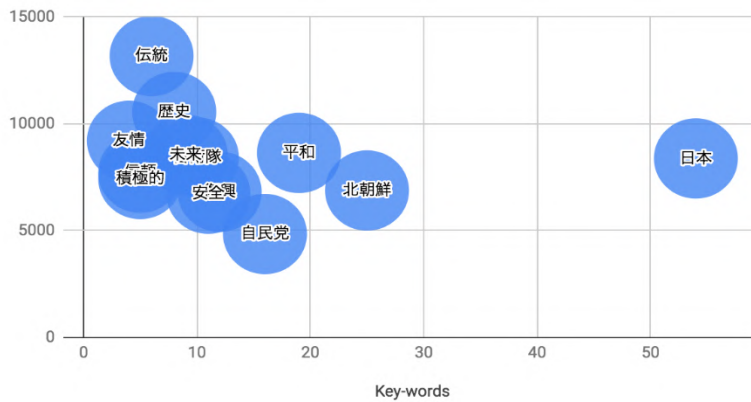


Figure 3. Keywords on Abe's FB Page  
Source: Facebook 2017

Figure 4 below shows the trend in the number of reactions attracted by Abe's post on his personal FB profile. After a peak of 39,167 reactions in January with a New Year's picture depicting the Prime Minister and First Lady in full figure outside the Prime Minister's Office, the number of reactions per post is stable at around 10 thousand and rebounds in February 2017. This month deserves particular attention. Despite the emergence of a scandal involving him and his wife, online he avoids any direct reference to it. On February 24, a picture is posted that depicts Abe meditating in a dark blue kimono. He is sit on a cushion with legs crossed and hands laid on the lap, in the typical zazen posture. The look on Abe's face is serious and focused. His eyes are shut,

and a sunray lights up the right part of his face. On the background, one can see the external structure of a wooden paneled door (*shōji*) can be seen.

A few points are noteworthy here. First, this is a rare case where the Japanese PM is not portrayed in a suit, but rather in a Japanese apparel. Second, the leader is caught alone (but one might suspect that he was not, in fact, having someone taking pictures at him meditating) from an oblique angle and slightly from below. These elements highlight a sense of detachment not just from the viewer, but from all the worldly agitations. Third, apart from aesthetic considerations, the timing of the post is worth analyzing. One day earlier, Abe was in the Diet to answer on MP's questions on the sale of public soil to the private education organization. Moreover, less than one week earlier, during a House Budget Commission Meeting, Abe expressed surprise at one Democratic Party member, Fukushima Nobuyuki asking him about the Moritomo gakuen case, and declared that if his wife or he himself were somehow involved in it, he would resign. He never reiterated this statement on his social network profile. In this sense, his stance online is somehow decoupled from the one he adopts offline.

The same “dodging” strategy is adopted later in the year when other scandals emerge forcing the Prime Minister to defend himself in the Diet and sack cabinet ministers. After March no post has reached the number of reactions registered in the early weeks of 2017.

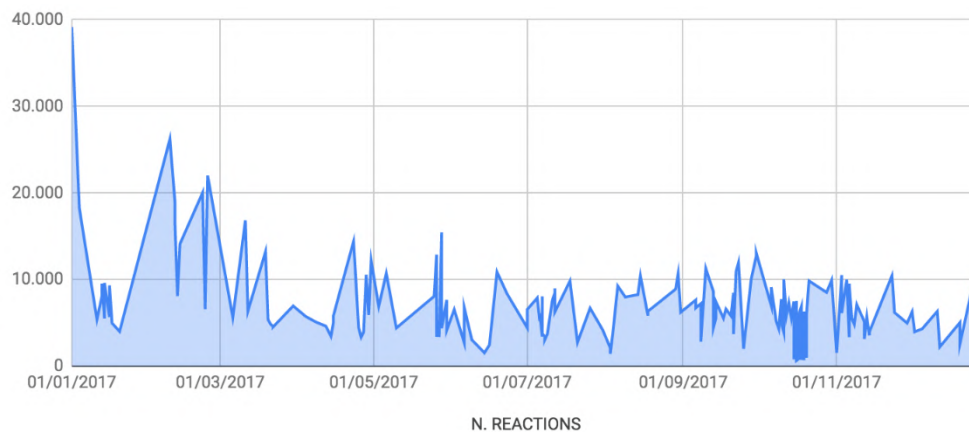


Figure 4. No. of Reactions per FB Post Throughout 2017  
Source: Facebook 2017

There are various explanations to this trend. Apart from technical ones, such as changes in the FB algorithm, and less appealing posts (the majority of which is dedicated to Abe's diplomatic duties) there might be a link with the falling approval rate that the PM and his cabinet had to face throughout 2017 (Fig. 5). Downturns from the initial 55,3 per cent, are visible in February (Moritomo gakuen scandal), April (sacking of Reconstruction Minister Imamura), May (Kake gakuen scandal) and July (GSDF South Sudan log scandal and Defense Minister Inada's resignation), before a mild recovery around August (month of the government reshuffle) and November (inauguration of the fourth Abe cabinet; up to 43,6 percent but well below the 50 per cent threshold).

In sum, the “appearance of wrong-doing” by the Prime Minister might have been a factor influencing public opinion and affecting Abe's online popularity even among like-minded individuals (Carlson and Reed 2018, 125).



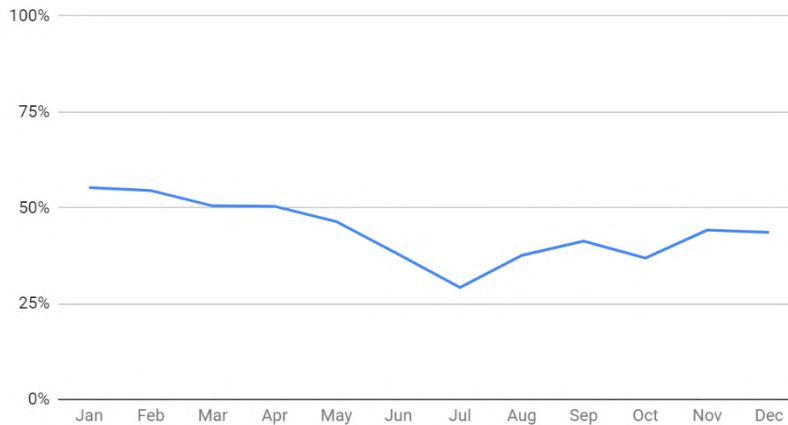


Figure 5. Abe Cabinet Approval Rate (2017)  
Source: TV Asahi 2020

## Conclusion

As the discussion presented above has showed, FB is a useful tool of political communication. Its closed and more manageable environment allows the user to exhibit him/herself in the most suitable way facing his/her own audience, often composed of like type individuals. In other words, particularly for political figures such as Japanese PM Abe and others outside Japan, FB is instrumental to the formation of a political narrative which is directly transmitted by its producer to its receiver(s).

These narratives need not to be explicit nor has it to follow a real-life pattern. One might agree with Papacharissi (2002) when she argues that electronic selves and real selves end up being decoupled in the attempt to show to the online community a more acceptable version of one's own character. It might be as in the case-study illustrated in previous paragraphs, implicit or silent. As has emerged from the analysis above, excluding the reposted official contents, PM Abe avoided references to politically sensitive issues, but, instead, he constructed a textual and visual narrative based on the following dynamics.

(1) Action/Reaction. The PM is always caught on action and even when he shows to one of the few relaxing moments in his frenetic activity (see for instance the zazen post), he says that he will do something eventually. In April, and later in August, he demonstrated his ability to quickly react to public criticism announcing the resignation of one of his cabinet's minister (Imamura Masahiro) and the cabinet reshuffle, also displaying to the public his ability to make amends for his poor choices in cabinet appointments.

(2) Proximity. This effect is realized in a number of ways. We identified two. Ideationally: the pictures themselves are conceived, in terms of angle and level, to involve the interactive participant (viewer) or make him/her feel at the same level of the represented participants; figuratively: pictures posted on the occasion of international summits in order to show what happens beyond the curtains of official diplomacy, are exemplary. Furthermore, pictures portraying the Japanese PM in traditional Japanese outfits are designed to convey to the public a sense of "Japaneseness."

(3) Strengthening cluster bonds. As discussed above, SNS communities are best described as informational clusters where the subject exhibits him/herself in front of like type individuals. As shown by the twin scandals

that saw Abe involved during 2017, external factors might affect the subject's credibility thus requiring action from him/her to try to fix the situation. Attacks on common enemies, even referring to the previously omitted sensitive topics, might serve as glue and reinforce cluster bonds. As demonstrated in the analysis above, only rarely, on two occasions, he has tackled the issue on his personal FB page and he has done so eight months after the first revelations his possible involvement in a scandal emerged. He did so somehow strategically, that is, not in order to admit any responsibility in the affair, but in order to advance another point in his political agenda: discipline some media.

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