Staying connected: Coronavirus in Japan

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Based on interviews conducted remotely with residents of Kyoto city and rural Köchi Prefecture in March 2020.

Kawamura san* is 28 years old, and got sick in March.

"The guidelines from the government are not clear at all. Many people are still going to work and even to bars. I feel very worried."

"I got sick in March with a high fever for 5 days. Day 1 I went to a clinic and they told me to go home and isolate and they gave me a leaflet for coronavirus with a number to call if symptoms persisted."

"Days 2 & 3 I rested at home and my fever continued."

"I took ibuprofen for 4 days."

"Days 6-10 my fever went away but I developed a cough. I stayed at home the whole time just in case it was the coronavirus."

"Day 4 I called a different clinic and they gave me Chinese medicine for the fever."

"Day 5 I called the coronavirus centre and they told me to go to hospital. I waited for two hours and when I saw the doctor she apologised and said she wanted to test me but I did not have enough of the symptoms of COVID-19."

*Names have been changed.
LINE is the most popular app in Japan, used mainly for messaging, calling, news, and shopping.

“I use LINE news to keep track of coronavirus updates.”
While the smartphone can be useful as a way to stay informed and connected during the pandemic, for some people their vulnerability has been highlighted by their inability to use such a device.

Flip-phones, known locally as galapagos phones or ‘garakei’, were popular in Japan before smartphones. They are still commonly used by older people.

"In Japan, many older people have only recently started using smartphones."

"This virus has shown Japanese people we are way behind with technology. It is not only elderly people. I know people in their 40s and 50s who do not know how to set up and use the internet."

"I am teaching my friend how to use her new smartphone. She switched from a 'galapagos' phone. I installed Skype and Spotify and Zoom. I am teaching her how to swipe and open apps. She finds the touch screen difficult. And every time an app asks permission, for example to use the camera, she doesn't want to press 'agree'."

Yamashita san, aged 70, Kyoto.

"Right now elderly people cannot meet family and they also have no access to the internet. It is very sad. Families and friends are doing as much as they can to help them get online."
"In March my 98-year-old father-in-law broke his leg. He usually lives with us, but he is now in hospital receiving rehabilitation."

"Because of Covid-19 we are not allowed to visit him. We deliver his underwear to the hospital every other day."

"We ask the nurse about him. He seems to be getting better little by little."

"I think it will be a long time until he is back home. He cannot use a smartphone. He must be lonely."

"For older people who become isolated because of the virus, I am worried this will make them more senile."
While for others, the use of smartphones during the coronavirus revealed the fine line between care and surveillance.

"I heard that some people were scared to answer the LINE Coronavirus survey honestly. They asked for your temperature. If you say that it is high, will someone come and get you?"

At the end of March the Japanese government launched a series of Coronavirus surveys via the messaging app LINE.

Q1. Please tell us about your current physical condition.
Q2. Please choose everything you are doing to prevent the spread of Coronavirus.
Q3. Did you return from abroad within the last two weeks?
Q4. Please tell us your age.
Q5. Please tell us your gender.
Q6. Please tell us your postcode.

I think that many Japanese people are not comfortable with the idea of surveillance by the government. That's why instead of a tracking app, the government used LINE as a sort of informal monitoring method.

However, social surveillance is a normal part of everyday life for many Japanese people, and some people say this is part of the reason why the infection rate has so far been relatively low.

"Someone went into my local care shop and told the owner he shouldn't be open. Some people think of themselves as the "stay-at-home policy"."

"The virus has made people bolder about correcting the behaviour of others. Normally everyone knows that other people are watching them, but now it is made explicit."

Businesses were advised to close, but for those that remained open such as some pachinko parlours, their names were announced on TV as a sort of public shaming deterrent.
The threat of the virus is not only about physical health, but social health too. The stigma of catching the virus adds extra anxiety around receiving care visits.

“I am sorry. I wish I could invite you inside, but I feel worried to have visitors.”

“Don’t worry! Next time I will phone you instead. We can also message using LINE.”

Komori san, care worker

Wada san, age 80, rural Köchi Prefecture
“There is a phrase you hear all the time right now...”

“Jishuku’ means ‘self-restraint’.”

“In Japanese village (‘mura’) culture...”

“Everyone observes everyone else closely.”

“This is why elderly people especially in rural areas are worried about becoming infected...”

“Even though coronavirus cases are quite low there.”

“If you get infected in a small community where everyone knows you...”

“You will become socially ostracised (‘mura-hachibu’).”

Based on a conversation with Dr. Yumi Kimura, Osaka University, in March 2020.
Social workers are therefore keeping in touch with elderly people via phone calls, and have started LINE chat groups to facilitate social interaction among isolated individuals. They also are increasingly relying on sensors and other monitoring devices for remote care.

Reactions to the Coronavirus reveal how people navigate the fine line between care and surveillance. Monitoring technologies such as sensors and LINE surveys might be seen to increase a feeling of surveillance from institutions, but these same technologies also increase people’s ability to control their personal space and avoid social scrutiny which is often more imposing in people’s daily lives. The pandemic highlights how care and surveillance are closely intertwined, involving constant negotiations of privacy and intimacy, dependency and autonomy.**

**For more on care in Japan see Iza Kavedžija’s book “Making Meaningful Lives” (Penn Press 2019)
Bringing anthropology home

In spring 2020 I was supposed to be back in Japan. I had conducted 16 months’ fieldwork there for my PhD between 2018-2019 and now had additional funding to build on my research on ageing and smartphones with a more applied project. In collaboration with Dr Yumi Kimura, a social nutrition researcher at Osaka University and Lise Sasaki, a medical anthropology masters graduate and research assistant on the project, we organised a smartphone intervention among rural elderly people in northern Kōchi Prefecture. While we were able to establish the intervention with two groups of people, we were not able to conduct extended ethnographic research as the outbreak of Covid-19 paused our plans. Much of our interaction with this community has been via the messaging application LINE in the group chats that we established as part of the intervention to promote digital sociality around nutrition. The pandemic and the subsequent decline of social opportunities available to people made our intervention among elderly smartphone users extremely timely. In order to understand how the smartphone fit within people’s experiences of the pandemic, I turned to the relationships I had established during my PhD fieldwork and discovered that the gap between those who had access to this technology and those without was widening as the smartphone became increasingly important for staying connected during social distancing.

While I was confined to my home in the UK, digital communication became integral for continuing my research remotely. When the pandemic began my research participants and I naturally exchanged messages of concern which in some cases evolved into longer conversations and video chats about how the situation was affecting them and their families. The collection of illustrations above draws on illustrated social media posts that I shared during this time, based on these conversations. The people with whom I spoke encouraged me to share their stories. They felt it was important to talk about how the pandemic was affecting people in different ways, not just directly though the virus but due to the associated impacts of isolation on health and wellbeing. For them, these were important angles that were overlooked in much of the media coverage of the pandemic. By illustrating and sharing small snippets from these conversations my intention was to communicate these less-told stories and show what anthropology is by touching upon the social, cultural, and historical factors that shape the way people respond to the pandemic. By sharing the posts on social media my hope was that they would reach people who might not typically come across anthropological research, and would demonstrate the kinds of stories that can be told when one has spent 16 months getting to know people and building relationships of trust and care.

Making anthropological research accessible outside of academia is one of my core ambitions as a Leach Fellow in Public Anthropology at the Royal Anthropological Institute, and illustration has a powerful role to play in this effort. This year, along with my colleague Dr Jennifer Cearns, we curated an exhibition called ‘Illustrating Anthropology’ featuring over sixty anthropologists from around the world who use illustration as both a mode of analysis and a way to tell stories within and outside of academia. The diversity of work on display is testament to the innovation and imaginative freedom that illustration affords academic work, and the positive response we have had from the public so far shows that these sorts of visual outputs can be highly effective as a means for attracting people to engage with research. In the two months since launch-
ing the online exhibition in September 2020 we had over 4,000 visitors to the site, and 13,500 views. Within one month the associated Instagram account had over 500 followers, and is growing daily as we gradually release all of the works in the exhibition.

My illustration experiment presented here also made me consider how visual dissemination can be used as a digital ethnographic research method. The pandemic forced physical distance between me and my fieldsite but through sharing content online I had the opportunity to bring anthropological research closer to the people the research is about and beyond. An interesting thing happened when I shared the posts - I received replies and messages from friends and strangers in Japan who also wanted to share their experiences with me. In this way, the method of remote ethnography shared via social media prompted a snowball effect – similar to how in face-to-face research meeting someone can often snowball into getting to know their friends and wider networks. Online, the snowball effect revealed further people who wanted to have their stories told and made remote fieldwork feel a little closer to the serendipitous encounters that characterise in-person ethnography. Sharing the posts also attracted positive feedback from my research participants, confirming that I had understood the situation correctly and sometimes prompting further discussion. In this way illustration shared through social media was a tool for extending ethnographic dialogue, and for affirming tentative ideas and analysis. While my hope is to return to Japan as soon as travel restrictions are lifted, this experience of remote dialogue with both research participants and the wider public through illustrated digital communication is one that I plan to continue. As anthropologists are now having to reckon with the challenges and possibilities of remote fieldwork, there is potential in multi-modal ethnography to engage participants more directly in the co-creation of anthropological knowledge, benefitting both the research and its wider appreciation beyond pay-walled journal articles and academic books.

Notes
1 https://illustratinganthropology.com/

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Laura Haapio-Kirk is a PhD student in Social Anthropology at University College London. Between 2018-2019 she conducted 16 months’ fieldwork in Kyoto city and rural Kōchi prefecture, Japan, looking at the intersection of smartphones and well-being in later life. She is currently writing and illustrating a book to be published by UCL Press next year, titled Ageing with Smartphones in Japan. In 2020 she was appointed Fellow in Public Anthropology at the Royal Anthropological Institute. Prior to starting her PhD she was a research assistant and public engagement officer on the Why We Post project at UCL.