
Suicide within two Techno-social Systems – Tokyo Transportation Grid and Local Mobile Networks

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Introduction

This paper explores the effects of suicide within two techno-social realms: the Tokyo transportation grid and local mobile networks. While these two are highly independent, one extremely carefully controlled and the other unconfined, decentralized and to certain extent random, we argue that an act of suicide triggers a transformation of the anomaly in one realm into emergent patterns in the other. Furthermore, the act of suicide has not only an immediate impact on those who find themselves in the train, but it also gets broadcasted through the integrated digital signage information system, which displays the information throughout all trains and stations in the Greater Tokyo metropolitan area. This bilingual (English/Japanese) system introduces one more interesting linguistic conveyance: while in English, the system broadcasts "Accident", in Japanese it is the Kanji characters "人身 実行" where "人身" means literally a "human body".

Suicide as a Pattern Translation Act

The Tokyo transportation system is a complex interconnected network of railway and subway spanning over Greater Tokyo that services around 35 million people for their daily commute. It is a typical example of what Deleuze and Guattari [1], or De Landa [2] respectfully, call an assemblage; composed of

people, technology, services, and information systems that serve both to people and to other parts of the transportation system itself. It is a highly organized, yet extremely complex system, with very little space for error and possible delay, that would cause a major disturbance. One of those most common disturbances is an act of suicide, which potentially brings disorder to the systems not only for the actual time needed to restore the scene of the incident to operational order, but for the longer amount of time needed to reintroduce order to the system. Such an act, usually, but not exclusively, happening in the evening hours, affects a great number of commuters. The news is spread through the broadcast system in a matter of minutes and triggers a consecutive phenomena of messaging among the commuters, as they try to alert others at places where they were supposed to arrive. While the mobile network and transportation systems can be seen as actor networks that are, to a great extent, independent and disconnected, the first being decentralized and showing a lot of random activity (messaging, internet access etc.), while the second being very organized and working based on order and control. We want to argue that the act of suicide is in fact an act of translation: it introduces a disturbance into the transportation system, an anomaly that creates a cascade of delays, reroutes, cancellations. But on the other hand, it also creates a set of patterns within mobile networks: the amount of communication significantly increases and at the same time, the destinations are appearing in order of the size of the anomaly and its reach within the transport network. Arguably, at such a moment, the two actor networks are interconnected and suicide works as an act of translation, or, as Latour says, *"that which is large is that which has successfully translated others and has*

therefore grown. Since size is nothing more than the end-product of translation, the need for two analytical vocabularies is thus avoided" [3]. It is a moment, when one actor network (mostly physical) falls into disorder and the other (digital) retakes its function, albeit transformed, and creates to certain extent corresponding patterns.

Patterns Appearing Within Mobile Networks

While the status is normal, these systems are not translated and not connected together, one is decentralized and random, the other is orderly and organized. The suicide introduces an anomaly into one that connects the other and translates it into a pattern. We argue, that this pattern has a certain degree of geographic order based on the geography of the transportation network, as demonstrated in our artwork. However, for the purpose of this paper, the thesis is speculative, as it was not possible to obtain enough empirical data for a cross referential comparison, as the data needed would contain a certain degree of privacy violation and the timeframe did not permit us to officially obtain it. While most of the effort concentrated on mapping the activity in mobile networks and its visual representation previously done was crossreferencing the event with the number of phone calls (LiftLabs [4], RealTime Rome [5], etc.), we propose to take this mapping further, to actually observe the geographical spread based on origins and destinations of mobile messaging and phone calls triggered by the act of suicide on the transportation system. Not only it would provide a next step in such research, but it would also demonstrate and prove the direct consequence between the accident and the the change of emerging patterns within the mobile network.

Suicide as a Broadcasted Event

In most modern societies, death is regarded as a rather private issue. It is also a solemn and serious affair. This is surely a key reason that within even the most advanced societies, the integration of advanced technology that is seen in almost all other aspects of life, has not made its way into the realm of death. Funerals follow all sorts of traditions and in the western tradition mourners are often provided with a printed program, which may be kept as a kind of memento of the event. It might seem sacrilegious to throw it away since this is the final keepsake of the dearly departed.

In terms of death announcements and memorials, we identify two main methods which follow a certain time sequence, with the occasional occurrence of a third method. The first and most immediate notification method is the telephone. Initially, the news of someone's passing is spread amongst relatives and close friends this way, as well as being passed by word of mouth in the community. Following this information sharing within the inner circles, announcements are often posted in newspaper obituary columns. This is a local and low-key broadcast. It may be received by several thousand, or more readers, most of whom will not know the deceased, and are not likely to be affected by the news, while it may reach some acquaintances who will be moved or saddened. Thirdly, in the case of an influential or prominent figure, the news of their passing may be widely broadcast in large newspaper articles, a variety of television shows, and in all varieties of online media, such as news sites and blogs.

When referring to suicide deaths in the public transit system in Tokyo, the above described methods of

disseminating information are drastically contrasted. The first people to be informed of the unfortunate event, after the witnesses and those onboard the obstructed train, are people traveling on other train lines who are in carriages equipped with video monitors that display delay announcements. People waiting on platforms will see announcements on the LCD schedule boards and hear audio announcements through PA systems.

While broadcast to a very large audience (depending on time, generally tens of thousands), this person is neither famous, nor a close relative. In fact, their identity is not at all revealed; they are not even considered as a human being. The way in which the announcements of train suicides in Japan fit into the society completely alters the meaning of the words "human body accident." It does not evoke images of a human body crushed between the wheels and the steel track, or of blood splattered on the windows of the carriage, rather it is simply a cause for delay such as "wind" or "technical problems."

It contrasts with a possibilities that publicly placed screens allow for. The broadcast system is truly ubiquitous - in some train cars on the Yamanote line there is altogether 16 screens, around 10 in others. While half of the screens is being used for displaying the travel data (next station, time to the next station, layout of the platform and exits on the next station, etc), the other half broadcasts advertisements. It is arguable, that the social potential of the screens could be used to generate joint experiences, as Struppek calls them [6], that would be targeted to improve awareness of suicidal consequences. However, such

debate should be carried out also in the field of psychology and suicide prevention.

Conclusion

This introductory paper presented possible views on suicide act committed within Tokyo transportation system. We argue, that it has a power of translation act working and connecting the digital mobile network with the transportation system and re-introducing the pattern emergence from one to another. Furthermore, there is an interesting departure point for a next step of physical / digital geography observing the correlations between anomalies and patterns within the actor networks.

Transportation Broadcast system presents a digital reflection of the suicidal act, transforming it to a depersonalized cause of the delay within the system. Together with the ubiquity of such accidents being put

alongside other causes of delay, it is being socially reflected as a mere annoyance..

References

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