

Photo: Kyodo News

A pizzeria that delivers in a city suburb in western Japan engages from time to time in “secret deliveries.” It is not uncommon for it to be asked by customers to “please deliver quietly to the back-door.” Such orders are meant to spare the customer the scorn of neighbors who might maliciously gossip, “The wife at that house won’t even prepare meals, so today she’s again resorting to delivery pizza.” Most people reading books on the train have the titles concealed by paper covers provided by bookstores because they do not want others to know what they are so engrossed in. With the Japanese, privacy is superseded by anxiety about what other people might think. This mentality also exerts an influence on the way in which Japanese media report on incidents.

“We’ve been asked not to make public the real names to reporters.” Yielding to the earnest pleas of victims, police have increasingly been identifying them in announcements in such a way as “Mr. A, aged 35.” A booklet recently compiled by the Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association, titled “Real Names and Reporting,” shows that half the police in Japan are using pseudonyms in their announcements. It warns: “If things are allowed to continue like this, the day when police consider the use of pseudonyms to be common practice is not so far away.”

According to the booklet, police withheld the name of a shopping center in Kumamoto Prefecture where a primary school girl was



The father of a slain Hiroshima elementary schoolgirl speaks at a press conference after a man accused of killing her was sentenced to life in prison.

Depending on the nature of an incident, victims’ names should sometimes be withheld, but to leave that judgment entirely up to the authorities would be dangerous. Japanese police have in the past been involved in big scandals and have committed mistakes in their investigations, and such cases exposed by the media are not few. But when the names of the people who could serve as leads are withheld from reporters, it becomes difficult for them to verify

## The Day When Proper Nouns Disappear from Newspapers

By Matsunaga Tsutomu

attacked, while they also hushed up the name of an inn in Kyoto Prefecture where a robbery occurred. And police did not release the name of a supermarket in Tottori Prefecture where somebody was injured. To have done otherwise, they reasoned, would have “caused inconvenience” for the establishments in question. In the case of a policeman who had his gun taken from him, police selfishly withheld his name. Police even fabricate the truth. A housewife in her 30s who was a victim of blackmail was said to be 46, while in the case of a son who held his father in confinement, not only was a fake name used for the father but reporters were told the victim was an “acquaintance” of the son.

Since the entry into force of the Act on the Protection of Personal Information, the use of pseudonyms in announcements has been on the rise in government offices besides the police. At the time of the *tsunami* disaster caused by the Sumatra earthquake, the Foreign Ministry refused to make public the names of Japanese fatalities. Also, it was reported then that airline companies, flooded with calls from people worried for the safety of their family members, declined to confirm whether they had boarded planes or not on grounds that they could not divulge personal information.

improprieties through their news-gathering activities.

Most of all, news articles full of pseudonyms lose a sense of reality. If a person who was leading a calm life becomes a victim of a heinous crime or an accident, it is precisely because that person’s name is in the story that readers feel empathy, that they are stirred to anger and conscious awareness.

“My daughter is not ‘a Hiroshima first-grade elementary school student,’ she’s ‘Kinoshita Airi’ and one of a kind.” In the case of a 2005 murder of this 7-year-old girl, the booklet says the bereaved father insisted on the use of his daughter’s real name. Likewise, Takahashi Shizue, spokeswoman for a group of bereaved families of victims of the 1995 sarin gas subway attacks, has been quoted in newspaper reports as saying, “If we were to use pseudonyms, we wouldn’t be able to effectively convey our message. The judgment (whether to use pseudonyms or real names) should be up to the victims.”

Instead of dreading how “society” might view them, not divulging their names and pursuing a low-key existence, some people are using their real names and raising their voices as victims. Japanese consciousness is beginning to change. **J.S.**

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