

# Development of Mass Media in Japan & Its Background

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## Dawning of Cross-Media Age

The advancement of mass media such as television, newspapers, magazines and radio contributed in no small measure to the economic development of Japan in the second half of the 20th century. TV broadcasting was introduced in the 1950s and took root in Japanese society during the so-called “high growth period” of the Japanese economy in the 1960s. It was TV that did the most to evolve the country’s sophisticated mass consumption society against that economic background.

In Japanese homes’ living rooms, TV took its place like a family member, provided various news, information on life and the economy, and entertainment, and aroused a strong desire for consumption through advertisements. TV broadcasting is scheduled to be completely digitized in 2011, triggering a drastic change in the country’s media environment. This, coupled with the rapid spread of a high-speed data communication network, will cause Japan to enter a cross-media age – the fusion of the media, based on a high-speed digital network. In regard to the platform for the cross-media, the Japanese market is currently marked by the rapid propaga-

tion of multi-function next-generation mobile phones, large-sized liquid-crystal home TV sets geared to digitized broadcasting and personal computers.

## High Literacy, Reading Public Back Japan’s Modernization

Japan’s modernization and successful advance into an industrial society since the Meiji Restoration of 140 years ago have owed a great deal to the print media, such as newspapers and magazines, and the publishing culture, which had already taken root in the Edo era (1603-1867), against the background of the high literacy ratio of the Japanese public. Since the Meiji Restoration, Japan successfully achieved modernization ahead of other Asian countries. Behind the success was the fact that the Japanese people’s literacy ratio was already very high toward the end of the Edo era, even compared with Western powers.

In the Bunka period (1804-1818) of the Edo era, there were as many as 1,200 to 1,300 large and small *terakoya* private schools in the Edo region, teaching reading, writing and arithmetic to the general public. The Japanese people’s literacy ratio is estimated to have

reached about 90% around 1900. In those days, it was extremely high compared with the rest of the world. The advancement of Japan’s publishing culture was backed by the presence of the highly literate general public eager to read. This is an important factor that needs to be taken into account when reviewing the development of Japan’s mass media.

## Basis of Media Development Built in Edo Era

During the Bunka and Bunsei periods (the early 19th century) of the Edo era, the publishing culture came to flourish. In the Kanei period (the mid-17th century) of the early Edo era, Japan’s publishing culture began with the woodprint publication of Chinese classics and Buddhist scriptures by bookstores in Kyoto. For the sake of the reading public, Ihara Saikaku’s *Ukiyozoshi* entertaining stories (novels of the floating world) were published during the Genroku period in the latter half of the 17th century, and *aohon/lakahon* (illustrated blue- and red-covered storybooks), which correspond to today’s paperbacks, in the middle of the 18th century, while the lending of these books came to be established as a full-blown business. Thus, the general public in the Edo era was already able to read thanks to the high literacy ratio based on the *terakoya* education.

During the Edo era in the second half of the 17th century, woodprint newspapers called *kawara-ban* (tile-block-print editions) were published, transmitting various information to the general public. They were similar to today’s popular tabloids, keeping the public informed about diverse things, such as natural disasters like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, rumors on world matters, *kabuki* plays and *sumo* wrestling. *Kawara-ban*, although woodprint papers, included colored prints, and this

Photos: Both possessed by Japan Newspaper Museum



Right: “Kawara-ban” tabloid reporting on an earthquake and tsunami in the late Edo era.

Left: “Nishikie-shimbun,” popular in the early Meiji era, carries news of a child tugging a bale of rice with incredible strength.

tradition was handed over to *nishikie-shimbun* (multi-colored woodblock print newspapers) after the Meiji Restoration. Furthermore, the Edo era also witnessed the development of advertising media in such forms as *bikifuda* (leaflets), *ebira* (posters), trademarks and signboards.

## Mass Media Prior to World War II

During the Meiji era (1868-1912), Japan introduced Western culture under the banner of civilization and enlightenment, and went on to develop into a modern industrial nation. Early in that era, multi-colored woodprint *nishikie-shimbun* reported on diverse world matters. Japan's first "newspaper" was published by Joseph Hiko, who had been rescued after a shipwreck and taken to the United States. He published Japan's first monthly newspaper in 1864.

The first daily newspaper *Yokohama Shimbun* (later renamed *Yokohama Mainichi Shimbun*) was founded in Yokohama on December 8, 1870 (the third year of the Meiji era). *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun* and *Yubin Hochi Shimbun* were issued in 1872, followed by *Yomiuri Shimbun* in 1874 and *Asahi Shimbun* in 1879. At first, newspapers focused on presenting editorial comments. However, newsgathering also became a major task for newspapers as a result of their wartime coverage of the Sino-Japanese War from 1894 and the Russo-Japanese War from 1904. News agencies also came into being in the late

Meiji era, and provided news to provincial newspapers in exchange for the use of advertisement space. Later, Japan's major advertisement agencies such as Dentsu and Hakuhodo derived from the advertisement sections of news agencies.

## Mass Media in Today's Japan

### TV's Role

After World War II, Japan continued to build an advanced mass consumption society, which reached its peak in the middle of the 1980s. In postwar Japanese society, four mass media – newspapers, magazines, television and radio – brought their characteristics into full play to arouse an earnest desire for consumption among the general public and thereby contributing to establishing an affluent society. Above all, TV broadcasting played a remarkable role. Since the debut of TV, Japanese people have viewed the world's news and experienced the world's joys and griefs through the medium of TV while pursuing a life of affluence. As of 2006, TV advertisements accounted for as much as about ¥2 trillion or one-third of Japan's total advertisement expenses of ¥6 trillion.

Even today, a great majority of Japanese people, while at home, make it a habit to leave their TV sets on to use them as a sort of time signal. A survey on how they spend their hours in their daily life, conducted by Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK) in 2005,

found that they spend three hours and 27 minutes on weekdays, four hours and three minutes on Saturdays, and four hours and 14 minutes on Sundays watching TV.

The complete shift of terrestrial telecasting to digital broadcasting, slated for 2011, will be a crucial test for terrestrial telecasters, which have so far proved their advertising effects mainly through surveys on household audience ratings. The progress of information technology has brought about a remarkable advance in the techniques of measuring and forecasting the effects of advertisements. This will enable terrestrial telecasting to drastically alter its measurement of advertising effects and present even more elaborate results of audience surveys, making it possible to realize a more effective combination of mass media for advertising. Moreover, the complete digitization of telecasting will enable new services, such as interactive broadcasts, fusion with other media and video-on-demand services. As a result, TV viewers will be able to watch diverse programs of their choice whenever they please.

### Future of Newspapers

Newspapers still continue to be a powerful component of the mass media. Nonetheless, the digitization of the mass media has brought on a decline in the circulation of newspapers. According to a survey by the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association in 2002, the total circulation of national and provincial newspapers plus sports tabloids was about 50 million copies. However, the survey also confirmed a circulation decline for an unprecedented third straight year.

Up to around the 1960s, advertising expenditures via newspapers exceeded those of TV. Since the 1970s, however, the ranking has been reversed. Newspapers' share of total advertising spending has shrunk from a decade ago when the Internet began to spread.

Japan's major national newspapers continue to be giant news media without parallel in the world, with *Asahi Shimbun* and *Yomiuri Shimbun* boasting a circulation of about 10 million and

Photos: Both possessed by Japan Newspaper Museum



Right: *Tokyo Nichinichi Shimbun* launched two years after the foundation of the first daily newspaper (Miyazawa Tomoko collection)

Left: Japan's first daily newspaper *Yokohama Shimbun*.

eight million, respectively. Newspaper publishers play a central role in almost all media groups in Japan.

Since the debut of the Internet in the mid-1990s, both the circulation and advertising revenues of newspapers have continued to decrease under the impact of the Internet. Nonetheless, Japanese newspapers have been slow to go online compared with their US counterparts. Over the past 10 years, the websites of Japanese newspapers have been improved and expanded. It may be said, however, that they are still immature as both news sites and advertising sites compared with those of the leading US dailies *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, which have led the way in newspapers' shift to online services. Be that as it may, as the number of people reading more than one newspaper via the Internet increases in parallel with the progress of paperless mass media, Japan's giant newspapers, which rely on home delivery through distribution agents, appear to be in for an inevitable change.

### Magazines Helped Form Japanese Lifestyle

When it comes to mass media's contribution to forming the lifestyle of Japanese society after the war, magazines need to be noted as an influential factor. During the 1980s, magazines enjoyed a heyday with the circulation of some magazines exceeding one million each. Today, however, they are already past the peak.

Magazine circulation plunged during the decade from 1995 to 2006. Among men's weeklies, for instance, *Shukan Post* saw its circulation plummet from 860,000 to 400,000, while *Shukan Gendai* suffered a fall from 720,000 to 440,000. A steep downtrend was also witnessed by magazines dedicated to women's lifestyles – down to 340,000 from 940,000 for *Nonno* and down to 360,000 from 740,000 for *with*. Some people attribute the sharp downswing to the impact of the Internet, which began to spread around 1996. But this is not the only cause. Among numerous other negative factors are a decline in the

younger population, a prolonged recession in the 1990s and youngsters' increasing indifference to fashion. Still another factor is young people's changing form of contact with the media stemming from the propagation of the Internet and mobile phones.

### Radio Seeking Out Niches in Mass Media

Full-scale radio broadcasting began in 1925, and its diffusion ratio already reached 50% or so before World War II as radio started to establish itself as a medium for news transmission. Until the spread of TV in the 1960s, radio served as the only wireless medium of transmitting news and entertainment to the general public. The popular radio drama *Kimi-no-Na-wa* (Your Name Is?) served to hearten Japanese people in their trying days after the war. With the advent of TV, however, radio handed over the role to TV and sought to fill niches in the mass media market through the broadcast of sports events and musical programs.

Radio, although surviving as part of mass media niches, remains at a low ebb. It was outstripped by the Internet in terms of advertising expenditures in 2004, and the gap between the two has continued to widen ever since. From the second half of the 1980s, many small FM stations for communities came into being, and a considerable number of them remain in service today. From now on, they are expected to survive as part of the Internet service to engage in Internet Protocol (IP) broadcasting. How best to survive the current trend toward digitization poses a big problem for radio relying only on voice transmission.

### Internet for Mass Media

According to the 2007 White Paper on Data Communication, the diffusion ratio of the Internet among Japanese people was 68.5% as of 2006, and an estimated 87.54 million people were using the Internet (up 2.6% from the previous year). When the Internet began to spread among the public, there

were concerns about the possible “digital divide” (economic gap between Internet users and others). Nowadays, however, the Internet has already taken firm root in the daily lives of Japanese people. The collection of information via the Internet has become a universal practice while the use of e-mail, Net shopping and Net auctions is gradually spreading among the public at large.

Today, the Internet is coming into wide use in Japan as well irrespective of differences in generation and gender. The ratio of Internet use via mobile phones, spreading fast mainly among youngsters, has surpassed 50% since 2004. Of late, social networking service (SNS) sites such as *mixi* (claiming a membership of 10 million) are also spreading, causing “virtual communities” to grow in Japan as well, like the “Second Life” originating in the United States. Thus, Japanese society is also experiencing the birth of interactive communication in which recipients of information become the transmitter of information at the same time. A survey by a US researcher has found that the number of blogs using Japanese exceeded that of English-language blogs in 2006. This has disproved the generally accepted view that the Japanese are not good at transmitting information.

The Internet is also definitely gaining ground in the world of advertising media. Internet advertisements were worth approximately ¥1.6 billion 10 years ago in 1997. But their annual total outstripped that of radio in 2004, rising to ¥181.4 billion, and further surged to ¥363.0 billion in 2006, coming close to magazine advertising. From 2011 when terrestrial TV broadcasting will be entirely digitized, the fusion of the Internet with other media is expected to make further headway, causing a new cross-media age to come into full bloom in Japan's mass media world as well.

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