

The Media's Role in Bridging the Perception Gap

By Iwasaki Toshio

In a novel by the popular Japanese author Miyamoto Teru, staged in Southeast Asia, the hero, a Japanese man, says: "When I come into contact with people of a different nation from mine and I get deceived, discriminated against, or stuck in a trough of misunderstanding, I somehow feel that I have been defeated not by that person but by that culture. I sink into the illusion of having been sort of insulted by that culture. And then I feel hatred not against that person but against that country."

In his novels, Miyamoto repeatedly writes (in a friendly manner) about characters who have connections with foreign lands and people and whose lives are steered by these encounters.

His descriptions always show the feelings of ordinary people who are living in the present. In other words, Miyamoto has won support from readers for depicting the feelings and wishes of ordinary people in Japan today who have received a university education and have a middle-class consciousness. The above quote can also be seen as the frank expression of the sentiments of the ordinary Japanese.

In the world today, with the increase in the movement of people and commodities across national borders, the transmission of knowledge has become easier. The progress of electronic means of information processing and communication has accelerated this trend, and we are now in an age when knowledge can be beamed through cyberspace instantaneously as the common property of the world.

But despite these developments, it is still not unusual at all for people of different countries and different nationalities to be unable to share common feelings that should be shared and to implant negative impressions of others in their minds. A major reason for this situation, naturally enough, is that differences in national cultures that have been built up over a long period of time, from ways of greeting and ways

of eating to ways of doing business, are not easily understood by others. Another reason, however, is the nature of information provided by the media, which are the main standard-bearers of the common ownership of knowledge.

The aim of this article is to examine how much the media are making efforts toward the sharing of information with the same content, which is necessary if people from different countries and nationalities are to understand each other. For example, two nationalities might have the same word in their vocabularies, but they do not necessarily use that word with the same meaning. In this case, simply transferring the word from one vocabulary to the other might well have the effect of further widening the trough of misunderstanding.

Recently, a good example of this kind of situation occurred between Japan and the United States. And it was not a diplomatic or a trade issue. The problem concerned baseball, the beloved sport of fans on both sides of the Pacific. The Central League, one of Japan's two professional baseball leagues, invited over an American umpire to officiate in regular season games in Japan. After all, the U.S. Major League is the mecca of world baseball, and Japanese baseball circles have a strong desire to learn from the U.S. And there were probably other factors in the background, too, such as the increased exchange between Japanese and the American players over the past few years and the possibility of professional players being allowed to participate in the Olympics. I think it was a good idea, anyway.

The problem is that although the rules are of course the same for Japanese and American baseball, Japanese professional baseball, in its history of more than half a century, has come to operate those rules in its own Japanese way. In this case, the problem was the strike zone. When the pitcher

hurls the ball toward the batter standing at home base, the home plate umpire imagines a zone in front of him to determine whether the pitch is a strike or a ball. But apparently Japanese and American umpires differ very slightly in their positioning of this zone.

When the American umpire, Mike Di Muro, came to officiate in the Central League in Japan, naturally he brought the American way of making decisions with him. And naturally, Japanese players were frustrated when his calls differed from the decisions that they were used to. The frustration mounted to a climax in one game, when a player protested a Di Muro call and shoved the American umpire in the chest, upon which Di Muro, responding to instructions from home, resigned and went back to the U.S.

Now, this problem is essentially identical to the case of, for example, the seeds of a plant being sown in a foreign land. After a while, the plant will grow, but in a different manner, having accustomed itself to a different soil and climate. Or the case of Americans who left their native Britain and built up their own unique culture in the U.S. Today, as is clear even to a foreigner to the U.S. like myself, Americans speak their own style of English that is quite different from British English. But you will not find any British person who would say that American English is not English. And whatever your liking in taste and appearance might be, you have to agree that the large eggplant of the U.S. and the small eggplant of Japan are both eggplants. But all the same, everyone knows well that there is some difference here.

The other problem here is that, whatever the situation might be, the umpire's decision should be treated as the final word.

How did the media in Japan and the U.S. handle this incident? Well, the common feature of coverage in both

countries was their focus on the violent and coercive behavior of players and managers against the authority of umpires. They do not seem to have taken the perspective of looking into the background—that is, the style of Japanese baseball, which, while learning from the American game, has developed in its own indigenous way.

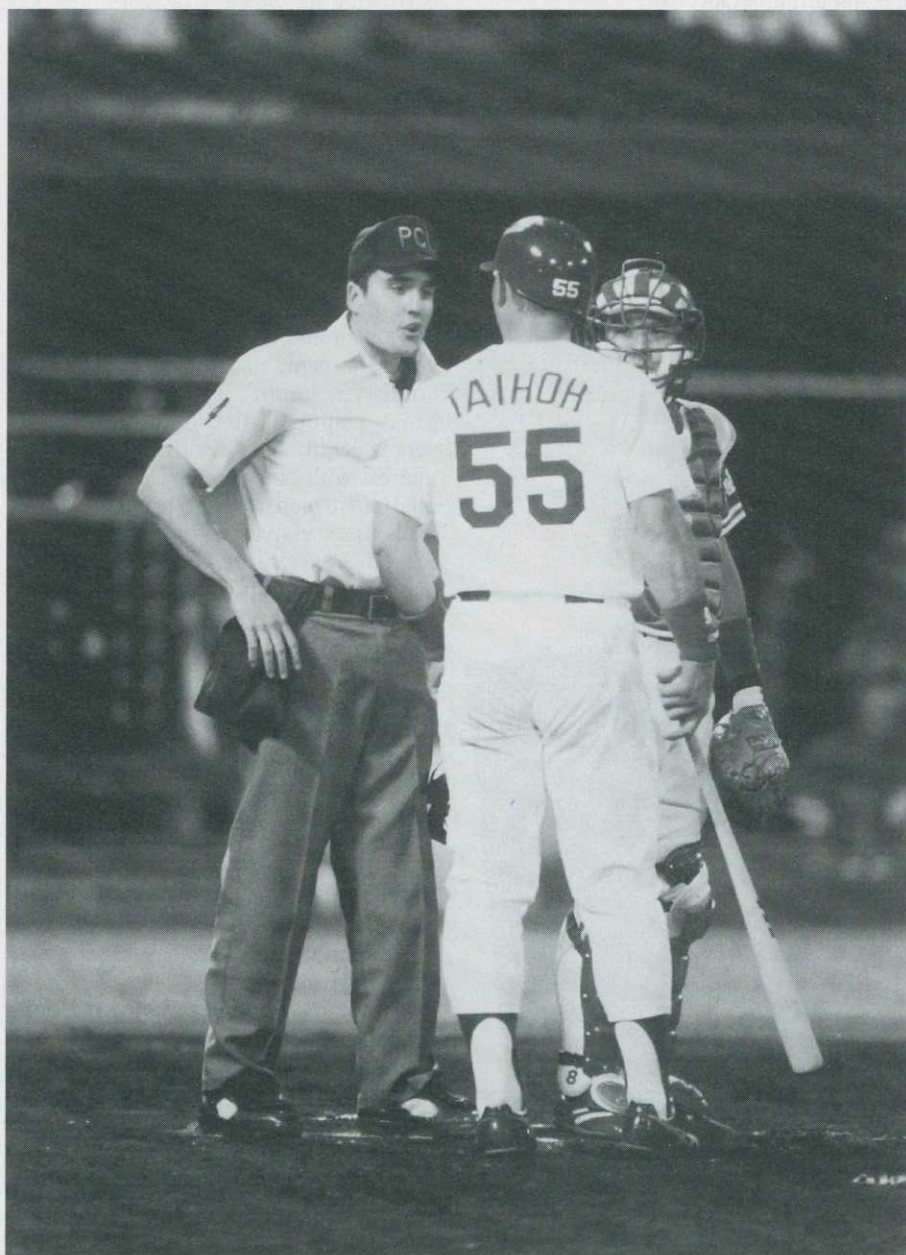
The general tone of American media was that, while umpires have established an authoritative position in the U.S., the home of baseball, Japanese umpires do not have authority, and their decisions are frequently overturned by violent behavior. This snobbish birthplace mentality and attitude of superiority, with the U.S. looking

down from its lofty heights and reproving Japan for the low level of its baseball, was clearly evident in an article in the *Washington Post* immediately after the Di Muro incident. The article said: "He was invited to Japan in hopes of helping install strict and impartial officiating to Japanese baseball, where disputed calls are often negotiated. But his firm style quickly drew criticism from local players and managers."

Meanwhile, many of the Japanese media, responding sensitively to the fact that the U.S. media were taking up the incident in grand fashion, seemed to cover the affair as if it were a new manifestation of Japan-U.S. friction. One newspaper also commented that the calls by the Japanese professional baseball leagues and teams, astonished by the huge media response, for self-control in complaining to and heckling umpires in protest at their decisions was typical of the Japanese weakness against foreign pressure, as exemplified in trade friction issues.

Needless to say, protesting against decisions in a violent manner represents behavior that should be censured. And it is also acceptable, I suppose, for the U.S. media to adopt a snobbish attitude and express surprise at the immaturity of baseball in Japan. After all, Japan did learn baseball from the U.S., and most Japanese do consider the U.S. as the home of baseball. It is a fact that some top Japanese players, such as Nomo Hideo and Irabu Hideki, have cast aside the promise of certain glory in Japan to fulfill their dream of playing in the U.S. Major League.

But still, concerning the difference in Japanese and American strike zones, this does not mean that the American-style zone is absolutely correct and the Japanese-style zone is a mistake. Hundreds of American players have come to play in Japan over the years, and even an amateur fan like myself has frequently heard about the trouble that famous players who have made a name for themselves in the Major League have had with the different strike zones. So maybe the Japanese Central League should have made some necessary adjustments when it invited



Foreign language: Mike Di Muro found national borders in a baseball game

Di Muro. Central League President Kawashima Hiromori reportedly told Di Muro that he wanted him to umpire just as he did in the U.S. If that was the case, then Di Muro was being quite faithful in defending his style, and either the league authorities did not clearly inform teams of their decision, or the players and managers simply ignored the decision.

My concern is that if the media, in commenting on this issue, go no further than to say that overturning an umpire's call through violence is a bad custom that would never be permitted in the U.S., then this would tie up with the Japan-U.S. gap seen in the political and economic fields and unnecessarily have the result of lending a hand to the

widening of the gap between the Japanese and American people. An important duty of the media is to bring about the sharing of knowledge and universalism, which in this case means making efforts to properly understand Japanese baseball (one aspect of culture that has a history of more than half a century) from, precisely, an unbiased and impartial perspective.

Regarding this incident, I would finally just like to mention one item of coverage on the Japanese side. Watching a special program broadcast on NHK television, I learned that there was also a period in the history of the American Major League in which umpires were disdained and that American umpires established the

authority that they have today through their own efforts over a long time. This program also told me how the American umpires' organization was constantly making resolute efforts to protect this authority. Through this program, I was able to learn about the depth of American baseball. I would say that this broadcast was successful in narrowing the Japan-U.S. gap.

Standing in the way of mutual understanding between different countries and nationalities, however, is the irksome problem of national interest. If the national interest of one country is infringed by another country, the people of that country could suffer a loss of honor and livelihood, so people place extreme importance on national interest. That is only natural, of course. The problem comes when extreme patriotism and national pride are stirred up in the name of national interest or a country's honor. The media have a great responsibility here, too. Most people learn about conflicts of national interest with other countries through the media, so sensational reporting only leads to excessive response.

As I was writing this article, Japan was commemorating the end of World War II on August 15. Around this time, Japanese television stations and newspapers every year carry special programs and articles about the war. On August 5 of this year, the *Asahi Shimbun* in its evening edition reported on a lecture delivered by Dr. Martin Harwit, the former director of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, to the World Conference of Mayors for Peace Through Intercity Solidarity, which was held in Hiroshima on the same day. The article caught my attention.

Harwit had planned to hold an atomic bomb exhibition at the museum the year before last, which was the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, but was forced to scrap the plan and resign after an outburst of opposition in the U.S. The article reported Harwit as saying that in order to fill in the perception gap with other countries, it is important to take another look at your own country's history. At the same



Images of the other: What does the media construct in reporting?



time, Harwit noted that 90% of the 3,000 or so letters that were sent to the museum at the time of the debate about the planned exhibition voiced opposition to the exhibition, saying that "we don't need an exhibition that raises objections to the dropping of the atomic bombs, which brought the war to an end and prevented further U.S. military casualties."

Most Japanese are unconvinced by this climate of opinion in the U.S. Ironically, though, most of these Japanese also do not know that special reports critical of Japan's own behavior in the war are carried in Korea, China, and Southeast Asian countries, especially at this time of the year. Whatever the case, the Japanese and U.S. media face the question of how to build a bridge of common understanding over a situation in which, to quote the *Asahi* article, when one side cries "no more Hiroshimas," the other side shouts "remember Pearl Harbor." And this problem is a common one not only for Japan and the U.S., but for all the different countries, nationalities, and cultures of the world.

As I was just about to finish this article, I happened to read an article on U.S. media coverage of Japan written by U.S. journalist Charles Burress. It was a two-part series carried on the August 18 and 23 issues of *The Japan Times*. Burress is a staff writer of *The San Francisco Chronicle* who has just finished up a year of research as a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Tokyo.

Part I of the series was titled "The U.S. media is tarnished by its coverage of Japan" and Part II "Painting the Japanese with a broad and insulting brush." As the titles suggested, Burress exemplified in detail biased U.S. media coverage of Japan, and criticized U.S. journalism for having damaged its own credibility and tarnished its fame.

Burress cited as an example a remark made in February 1992 by then Japanese Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi concerning the U.S. work ethic. He was quoted by the Associated Press as saying, "I have along felt that they (Americans) lack a work ethic." It was front-page

news all over the U.S. and Miyazawa's comment aroused strong U.S. antagonism toward Japan. Burress doubted the authenticity of U.S. media reporting of Miyazawa's purported remark and started his own survey, wondering how Miyazawa, known for intelligence and good grasp of diplomatic handling of the U.S., made such an inflammatory remark in his capacity as prime minister at a time when trade frictions between Japan and U.S. were heating up.

As it turned out, Miyazawa did not utter such words. His words were mistranslated and taken out of context. His exact words were, literally, "In that area, I have long thought that a work ethic may be lacking." Referring to the key phrase "in that area," the U.S. journalist explained that it referred to Miyazawa's immediately preceding remarks about junk bonds, leveraged buyouts and other fast-buck dealing on Wall Street. "He (Miyazawa) said the same problem existed in Japan's bubble economy. He was not talking about Americans as a whole. He merely said a work ethic is lacking in the so-called money-game sector of both countries." Though he was not sure whether the mistranslation was a simple, isolated effort or represented a deep current in U.S. coverage of Japan, Burress lamented that he had found a disturbingly large amount of biased U.S. coverage of Japan.

He pointed out that even such credible U.S. media as *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* used biased words "Japan," "Japanese," or "Japan Inc." referring to a Japanese company or group which purchased a U.S. company. He also mentioned that such usage portrays individual companies or groups as if they represent the whole nation, as if the Japanese were just one faceless, monolithic mass marching together. In his judgment, such reference is never made to companies in other countries. He also noted the U.S. media's preference to use the word "invade" in reference to Japanese corporate activities in the U.S. and cited a *Newsweek* cover story on Sony's purchase of Columbia Pictures in 1989,

which was titled 'Japan Invades Hollywood.' "This sort of language paints Japan as a hostile force seeking to defeat the U.S. and easily rekindles Pacific War hatreds. Interestingly, the magazine's international edition, which circulates in Japan, changed the cover to say, 'Japan moves into Hollywood,'" said Burress.

Referring to comments that the Japanese press is just as bad, or even worse, when it comes to biased reporting, Burress said that since he was not well enough informed to judge, he confined his analysis to the U.S. side. It seemed to me that his remark represented his pride, and affection, of journalism of his home country. I sincerely hope that Japanese journalists will take his remark as a reminder of how they should report.

Burress made two suggestions to reduce biased coverage on Japan by the U.S. media: 1) teach American journalists in Japan more of the nation's history, culture and language, and 2) become more international in outlook as the world becomes increasingly globalized. "Of course, we must still report from our home-country perspective for our own readers or viewers, but we should do it as nonpartisan observers without the taint of jingoism and without favoring political propaganda on either side. We American reporters and editors covering Japan should leave our loyalty to Uncle Sam at the door when we come work everyday. We can pick it back up when we go home, but while we're on the job, I think we should strive to produce stories that people in both countries will find fair," he asserted.

Burress' suggestions are what should be borne in mind not only by U.S. journalists reporting on Japan, but by all journalists who report on a country or region which has a different culture from that of their own.

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