

# Participatory Journalism in Japan

By Yukawa Tsuruaki

**B**LOGS are breaking new journalistic ground in the United States. In South Korea, a public participatory news site called “OhmyNews” has become established as a press organ. In Japan too, following the trends in these two closest countries, participatory news sites have started to appear, although they remaining quite fragile.

The blogging boom reached Japan over a year and a half ago, and the number of active bloggers has grown to almost one million. However, Japanese blogs tend to be rather miscellaneous and personal, in the style of a diary. In the United States, certain blogs have established a reputation for their journalistic expression in articles. Some have even received press passes to the White House or other government agencies. Japan, however, has yet to produce a blog which is widely recognized as real journalism.

There is, however, a participatory news site in Japan named “JANJAN” where anyone can register and become a journalist, publishing their writing on the site. Before setting it up, the founder of this site closely observed the South Korean OhmyNews site – in fact, the site features an operating system identical to its predecessor. While OhmyNews has over 30,000 contributors, JANJAN has less than 200. OhmyNews has hundreds of articles contributed per day and is recognized as a press organization, as it is a member of the press club and has been granted an exclusive interview with the president. JANJAN, on the other hand, only receives about 20 contributions a day and is largely unknown to the wider public. OhmyNews is regarded as the main architect of the election of President Roh Moo-hyun, whereas JANJAN has yet to show its influence in society.

Much better known in Japan is “livedoor PJ News” (PJ stands for “public journalist”), despite being a latecomer.

This citizen journalist site is hosted by the major Internet portal company, livedoor. Although the set up is almost identical to that of its progenitor, the site has grabbed the spotlight for being hosted by livedoor, the company which gained attention in economic circles for its attempted takeover of a professional baseball team and a radio station.

Last summer, the site started to recruit in-house journalists, and advertised for citizen journalists in November. From early this year, articles written by the citizen journalists started to appear on the site. The original intention was to have around 40 in-house journalists and 300 citizen journalists, but so far the site only has a few in-house writers and more than 100 registered citizen journalists. There are only a handful of postings each day. The project manager, who spoke so enthusiastically about the ideals of participatory journalism, was transferred at the end of last year. Somehow the direction within the company seems to have shifted, and the project has lost some priority.

Does this mean, then, that participatory journalism sites will never take off in Japan? There could be several reasons for the lack of success of US-style blogging and South Korean-style public journalism in Japan. I think one of them is the difference in the political climate. In the United States or South Korea, changes in the political regime are a regular occurrence, so many ordinary people take at least some interest in politics. Throughout Japan’s post-war history, the Liberal Democratic Party has almost always been in power. People have little experience with political change, and it is difficult for them to feel that their vote can have any impact on politics. If interest in politics is low, then ordinary people engage in political debate far less than they do in the United States or South Korea.

In addition, in the United States,

many people use blogs to promote themselves in order to further their career, and the Internet abounds with specialist information. Although job mobility is on the increase in Japan, the motivation for many is simply dissatisfaction with their current workplace, rather than the positive move to enhance a career that is the norm in the United States. As most people are not looking to make a strategic career move, few people would dare to publish a blog with specialist information as a self-promotion method, taking the risk of being discovered by their employer.

All this is not to say, however, that participatory journalism has not taken off at all in Japan. There is a giant online bulletin board known as Nihonchannel (Channel 2). The postings are generally made anonymously, so the site is filled with irresponsible remarks – some have even likened it to “lavatory wall graffiti.” However, the postings occasionally trigger a journalistic move to expose a false report by the conventional media.

On another front, non-profit organizations have become increasingly active in recent years. I anticipate that such NPOs will initiate a much more active web-based debate in the future, as they will highlight certain issues, and discussion on blogs and bulletin boards will ensue.

This is not exactly US-style blog journalism, nor is it South Korean-style citizen journalism. In fact, rather than calling it journalism, it might be better to call it activism – perhaps even a kind of “discussion movement.” In time, a unique Japanese style of participatory journalism may emerge. Looking at the web-based debates recently, I feel that we may not have to wait too much longer. **JS**

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