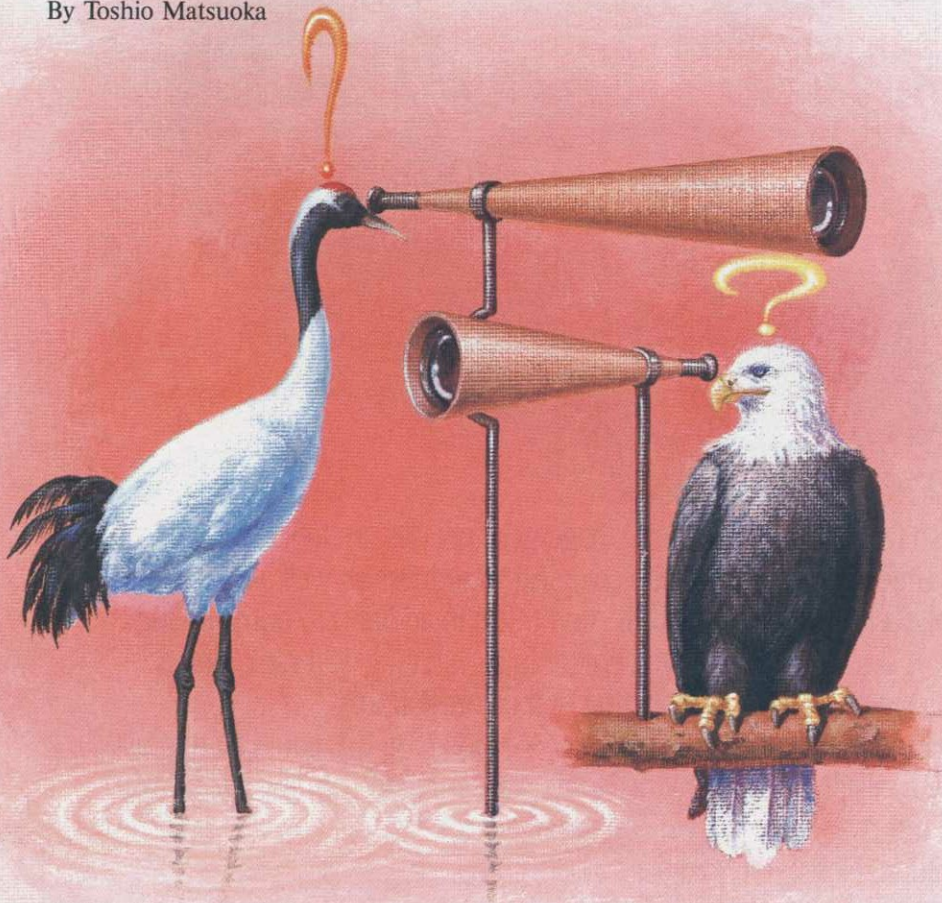


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he Japan-U.S. Balance of Communication

By Toshio Matsuoka



All too often, people looking at the balance of communication look only at that communication that is consciously initiated in an effort to gain the other side's understanding of prevailing conditions and special circumstances. Yet such communication is only part of the story. Looking back over the postwar relationship between Japan and the United States, there was very little information communication initiated by Japan in the early years.

Thus the images of Japan that prevailed in the United States were informed by Pearl Harbor and other wartime experiences or by the devastation and desolation of postwar Japan. However, Japan has made tremendous progress in the decades since then, and a communication gap has arisen as the American people's images of Japan have been unable to keep up with the changing reality of Japan.

Shifting perceptions

For example, in the early postwar years, as in the prewar years, textiles were a major Japanese export. Quality was wanting, but the price was right, and these exports gave rise to a perception of Japanese products as cheap and shoddy. Yet Japanese textiles and other products have since shown major quality improvements and Japanese exports to the United States have grown rapidly as a consequence. Yet because the change was so sudden, it was difficult for many Americans to accept the new reality and a perception gap resulted as they assumed that this export surge could only have been the result of dumping by Japanese companies.

What of Japanese perceptions going the other way? In many ways, this was the mirror image of the American perception gap as Japanese continued to feel that they could count on the United States to indulge a weak Japan out of noblesse oblige. Comfortable with this outdated perception, Japanese were unable to see the

many problems that the United States faced and how the United States was agonizing over its difficulties.

While there were increasing efforts on both sides to initiate more conscious information communication in hopes of achieving better understanding and much progress has been made, there are still many problems with the Japanese approach. Perhaps the biggest problem is the difficulty we have in expressing ourselves in English and being understood by English-speaking readers. Japan has a very short history of publishing in English, and Japanese are generally not used to reformulating their assumptions and arguments to make them easier for Western readers to understand. Although some progress has been seen recently and there are more titles being published in English, it is still difficult for these works to be accepted on a par with Western publications.

The second problem is the difficulty of ensuring that the English-language materials published in Japan actually reach their desired audiences. The United States has extensive indices, directories, clearing houses and databases that make it easy for people to access the information they want. Yet this is another area in which Japan lags behind, and it is essential that Japan improve its indices, directories, clearing houses and databases to make the available information more accessible to everyone.

If this can be done for Japan's English-language publications, it should result in broader readerships, better publications and still-broader readerships. Access is clearly important to the spread of English-language information from Japan. And this is important for more than English-language publications. The number of non-Japanese able to read Japanese is growing rapidly, and it is important that Japan improve information access for these people as well.

The third difficulty is in the means of delivering information. Most English-language publications are mailed to overseas readers, but international postage charges from Japan are very high and postage accounts for a considerable portion of the publishers' expenses, thereby



Some of the English-language periodicals published in Japan.

hindering the wider diffusion of this information. By contrast, Germany assumes that publicizing German concerns is an important part of making Germany better understood by other countries, and has set special low postage rates for such material. I wonder if this is not something that Japan could learn from.

The same can be said of the information centers that the government has set up overseas. With their well-stocked shelves and knowledgeable librarians, the American Centers in Japan are a very important resource for Japanese wishing to obtain information about the United States, and the various European governments have also set up information centers in Japan that put the Japanese overseas effort to shame.

Articulate leaders

What about non-print information? Americans have many public speaking opportunities on television and elsewhere, and not only politicians and government officials but also business and other leaders are very articulate speakers. Public speaking is seen as an effective means of communicating what the leader thinks and the kinds of policies he or she intends to pursue. By contrast, Japanese leaders are uncomfortable speaking in public, and it often happens that the people who listen to such speeches, especially the non-Japanese listeners, have great difficulty telling what it all means. This is another major barrier to the flow of information from Japan.

It is impossible to ignore the mass media in considering the balance of communication between Japan and the United States. With circulation figures

that are way beyond anything seen in the United States or Europe and influence to match, the leading Japanese newspapers—*Yomiuri* and *Asahi* among them—carry a lot of international news and help keep the Japanese public well informed. Yet even though they also publish English-language editions, their English-language circulations are minimal, their stories often pass unnoticed, and they do not serve as effective means of international communication.

It is the U.S. media that are the main conduits of information about Japan for Americans. When I lived in New York 20 years ago, it was very unusual for the U.S. media to run anything about Japan. Today, Japan is in the U.S. news almost every day, and there has been a major increase in the amount of information that the U.S. media carry on Japan. While this increase has come about largely irrespective of any efforts that Japan may or may not have made, it is a welcome development that goes part of the way toward rectifying the bilateral communication balance.

If there are problems, they arise from the fact that most of the stories that the U.S. media carry about Japan are based on information that is only available in Japanese from the Japanese media, and there are sometimes problems with the perspective that the Japanese media bring to these issues. Similarly, it sometimes happens that Japanese government and business leaders try to straddle issues by saying one thing to the Japanese media for domestic consumption and putting a different spin on their remarks to the foreign media for external consumption. Yet with Japanese information this widely accessed from overseas, such



Photo: Kyodo News Service

The overseas department at the Tokyo headquarters of Japan's biggest news agency.

straddling is no longer feasible and it is essential that Japanese leaders take consistent positions no matter who their audience is.

Individual acquaintances are another major source of information about Japan for non-Japanese. With the vast increases in the numbers of Japanese living in the United States and Americans living in Japan, personal communication has become a major information medium. Communication skills are thus a problem. Japanese have become much more proficient in English in recent years, but there is still considerable room for improvement. Even when English is no problem, there are often problems with the content of what is said.

It is essential that Japanese know their own culture and history—especially the period since the Meiji Restoration—and be able to discuss it knowledgeably with non-Japanese. Yet modern Japanese education tends to slide over recent history, especially the sensitive parts where expert opinion is divided, and many Japanese are not fully informed, for example, on the history of events leading to the Pacific War or on how the Pax Americana has favored Japan's postwar development and global stability. It is most unfortunate that this shortcoming undermines personal communication after people have made the effort needed to learn the language—that people have the medium but not the message.

Likewise, the intense competition for entry into the best schools has meant that Japanese education is focused on test results and that we tend to judge people not for what they are but for how much they know. In society, this translates into judging someone solely by how well he or she

does on the job. In this, Japanese society is very different from the United States, where people are judged not only on their job performance but also on how they behave as a responsible member of the community. In effect, the kind of person that Japanese education has worked so hard to mold over the last few decades is not necessarily the same kind of person that is trusted and respected in other countries.

Culture and values

This is also a major hindrance to communication between Japan and the United States on the personal level. When, for example, a prominent Japanese couple attends a party in the United States, the other wives at the party are almost inevitably involved in volunteer community activities. First lady Barbara Bush, for example, has been active for decades in a volunteer effort to promote literacy. Yet very few wives of prominent Japanese are active in such volunteer activities, and there is thus no common ground for them to communicate with their American counterparts.

It is not enough to say that the cultures are different and that is why we have different customs and hence communication difficulties. It is important for Japanese to understand U.S. values and to seek to close the value gap. Otherwise, Japanese will never be respected in the United States and we will always have a communication gap. Personal values are also at the heart of the issue of how Japan can and should contribute to the international community.

In discussing Japan-U.S. communication, Japan has a tendency to focus exclusively on seeking U.S. understanding of the Japanese position and even to argue that Japan is a special case deserving special consideration because of special circumstances. Put on the individual level, what would we think if one party to a conversation kept harping on the good work that he was doing or how outstanding he was? The message would begin to wear thin very quickly, and we should not be surprised that the booster was disliked. Conversation is effective only when the

two sides are discussing something they are both interested in. And knowing what the other side thinks about these shared interests is the key to better communication.

Looking at the many English-language publications that are printed in Japan and the many speeches by Japanese leaders, I wonder if their main thrust is not an appeal for understanding of the Japanese position and if there is not a dearth of discussion of shared interests. If so, these publications and speeches are boring at best and counterproductive at worst. There are many, many issues that Japan and the United States are both interested in today. In fact, there are far more areas in which the two countries' interests coincide than there are areas in which they conflict.

To cite just a few, there are the environment, education, poverty and assistance to the Soviet Union. All of these are issues where Japan and the United States should be able to take common positions based on shared perceptions. On February 9, 1989, President Bush delivered his first State of the Union address to Congress. The issue that he devoted the most time to in this speech was drugs, and the issue that got the second-largest amount of attention was education—both of which are also important issues for Japan. Both of these problems are having a profound effect on the U.S. economy, and I would be surprised if they did not also present major problems for Japan and the rest of the world in the years ahead.

None of the issues pending between Japan and the United States are strictly bilateral issues. All issues are global today, and it is imperative that comments and suggestions from Japan be premised on the broader perspective of what Japan can do from this global perspective. And in this, it is important to be honest about the difficulties that these issues pose for Japan, for only then will Japan get a sympathetic hearing and be able to communicate effectively. ■

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