

# Japan-U.S. Information Balance: View from the U.S.

By Catrien Ross

I once studied physics with a professor who taught his students the need for a frame of reference in handling questions. Without this background perspective, he insisted, problems could not be given the proper weight; appropriate relationships could not be appreciated; and, ultimately, workable solutions could not be found.

In reviewing the balance of information from Japan to the United States, I am reminded again of my former professor's caution. The flow of information between Japan and the United States has been considerable, and, as interdependence between the two nations has grown, the demand for data has increased accordingly. But as the persisting perception gap in Japan-U.S. relations has shown, quantity of information is not in itself sufficient to guarantee mutual understanding or respect.

Ready access to information does not necessarily mean that either side is better *informed*. As both the United States and Japan are discovering, an informed society requires not only a high quality of information flow, but also the ability of its citizens to gauge the value and validity of information received. In other words, a frame of reference is essential.

Unfortunately, it is just such a frame of reference concerning Japan and the Japanese people that the average American lacks. Although media attention to Japan's economic performance has whetted American curiosity, especially in recent years, the desire for deeper knowledge remains limited. Indeed, several analysts have pointed out that the American market for news about Japan is largely confined to a small group comprising Japan scholars, people involved in Pacific Rim business and current affairs, and Japanese expatriates.

Small wonder, then, that many Americans should be susceptible to negative or sensational portrayals of Japan and Japan-U.S. relations. Lacking specialist knowledge, it is extremely difficult to analyze news items for accuracy and fair-

ness. Moreover, one danger of the information age in which we now live is that an overabundance of data creates the tendency to reduce issues to simplistic images or catchphrases. Hence Japan comes across as "Japan Inc.," and the Japanese people become "economic monsters."

Content of data is therefore very important in maintaining an information balance. Yet the majority of news articles about current Japan are focused almost exclusively on trade and economic issues, with accompanying political overtones. Despite a broad spectrum of emerging social and cultural concerns, there is a continuing emphasis on Japan's financial role and impact, to the exclusion of other, related topics.

Still, the United States coverage of Japan and the Japanese people is vastly improved, particularly in the last few years. Pick up any business magazine in America today, and there is likely to be at least one story about Japan or Japan-U.S. interaction. Even general interest consumer magazines are beginning to feature such items as, for example, the burgeoning Japanese presence in American local communities. These articles are tentatively moving away from superficial generalizations—i.e. "The Japanese"—to more insightful reporting that acknowledges the variety and complexity of underlying issues.

## Role of the mass media

As the heightened tensions during the Gulf War proved, news coverage from Japan was inadequate to explain the Japanese position to the satisfaction of American critics. Not only did this underscore the significance of context in presenting news content, it also highlighted the pivotal role the mass media plays in conveying accurate Japan-U.S. information.

Earlier this year, a conference on Japanese and American media was held in Honolulu, Hawaii. Sponsored by the

Mansfield Center for Pacific Affairs and the Dentsu Institute for Human Studies, the conference explored the balance and objectivity in media coverage of recent friction between the two nations. A total of 1,098 news reports covering the purchase of Rockefeller Center and Columbia Pictures, the FSX dispute and the SII were analyzed.

Although the study concluded that in general media coverage was balanced and objective, an estimated one in 10 articles was found to present a biased or distorted view of the issues involved, mainly by ascribing blame to one side in the debate. In these cases, according to the study, Americans were pictured as arrogant, emotional, extravagant people, and America as a nation in economic decline venting its frustrations on the Japanese. The Japanese, on the other hand, were pictured as an insular, opportunistic and untrustworthy people, if hardworking, efficient and productive.

Negative images and biased reporting also marked coverage of the Gulf War. In addition, this crisis in the information flow clearly illustrated the failure of the media to report the Japanese viewpoint to an American audience skeptical of Japan's sincerity and commitment. Frustration on the one side and disillusion on the other was thus needlessly exacerbated at a time when open communication was vital.

Such ongoing discrepancies may have given a major impetus to Japanese media companies, many of which have launched an aggressive drive to export news coverage from Japan to the United States. How successful this effort to reach a wider American public will be is uncertain. It does, however, indicate a growing awareness of the need to present the Japanese side of the story in international developments and events.

Historically, the Japanese appetite for information concerning America has been much greater than the American desire to learn about Japan. Consider-



ations of geographic size aside, this is currently reflected in the fact that in 1990 there were 273 Japanese correspondents stationed in America, compared with 70 correspondents from the American mass media in Japan. Moreover, many of these American correspondents were also responsible for covering other Asian countries.

A survey conducted by the East-West Center in Hawaii questioned foreign correspondents based in Washington and Tokyo on their impressions concerning Japan-U.S. news coverage. A majority of correspondents predicted increased bitterness in the Japan-U.S. relationship stemming from such problems as the trade surplus, highly visible Japanese investment moves, and Japan's perceived reluctance to share the burden of the Gulf War. Acknowledging that adversarial-style reporting and commentary serve to fuel emotional antagonisms, journalists surveyed nonetheless foresaw a growth in mass media "bashing" by both nations.

Many American and Japanese correspondents blamed the editorial policy of the home office for seeking sensationalism and controversy. Others bemoaned the oversimplification and stereotyping that has characterized coverage of Japan for American readers. One veteran American correspondent with 28 years of experience reporting from Japan admitted that media coverage of Japan-U.S. disputes has contributed to rising tensions. Interestingly enough, he puts the main blame on the writings on Japan of U.S.-based reporters and commentators.

Wherever the blame lies it is worth noting that in a relationship of true interdependence, some friction is inevitable and indeed normal. As closeness deepens, there is a natural jockeying for position to establish status and a sense of territory. It is only when friction goes unresolved that actual conflict results. The courage to openly and fairly tackle disputes means that friction can be a platform to resolve differences rather than a starting point of war. Rewards for such vigilance include a new level of maturity and a very real appreciation of the other side's position and point of view.

There is no denying that Japan and the United States are interdependent. The question is whether unresolved disagreements will be allowed to escalate beyond the point of reasonable discussion. Most analysts think not. Although the relationship between the two nations may from time to time become rather frayed, the extent of interdependence precludes a break. The damage would simply be too severe.

Yet a change in perceptions takes time. It is unrealistic, for example, to expect smooth settlement of trade disputes when there exists a widespread and deep-seated American belief that the Japanese market is closed and unfair. Japan may indeed be the largest buyer of U.S. agricultural products: the American image of Japan is otherwise.

### **Nature of information**

Most discussions of information balance concentrate on mass media efforts to disseminate data. But there are actually various types of information flow from Japan to the United States today.

A significant number of business transactions have taken place between Japanese and American companies and individuals. As a result there is now a substantial body of knowledge concerning the Japan-U.S. relationship at practical, working levels. Routine exchange of operating information not only deepens understanding of corporate culture and mores, it also promotes interaction among all the people involved. Organizational cooperation can therefore lead to individual acceptance of diversity. Positive personal experience, in turn, is a balancing factor in any information flow.

Even when the experience is negative, as several Japan-U.S. joint ventures have already discovered, much value can be gleaned. An analysis of failures can highlight vulnerable areas and point the way to future alternatives. Regardless of outcome, the process of exchange is itself invaluable in building a base of knowledge. Case studies are an ideal way to replace generalizations with specific details of the Japan-U.S. relationship.

Another conduit of information flow is

Japanese products. If buying habits are a measure of acceptance, then Americans express continual admiration for the Japanese ability to combine product reliability with price. Perception gap notwithstanding, at the level of their pocketbooks Americans have demonstrated exactly what they think of the Japanese. Even as policymakers in Washington bewail the trade deficit, the American public is happily responding to the message being sent by Japanese manufacturers—commitment to product quality and sophisticated market awareness.

Information flow from Japan to the United States also exists in the academic exchanges between America's Japan scholars and their Japanese counterparts. Japanologist study of various aspects of Japanese culture has produced numerous books and articles, the majority of which are not widely known beyond a limited circle of Japan experts. Paucity of interaction between these academic circles and the greater community is one drawback that could be overcome by increasing university outreach programs.

At the same time, American university and college campuses are now experiencing a burgeoning interest in Japanese language classes. Surge in demand is an indication of student awareness as to the relative importance of Japan and the Japanese in current world affairs.

Indeed, information flow beyond conventional mass media channels should perhaps be more adequately analyzed for impact on the Japan-U.S. perception gap. The potential of such flow might even be tapped to contribute positively to emerging Japan-U.S. relations.

### **Grass roots activism**

To alter fundamental perceptions requires a penetration at fundamental layers of thought. In terms of the Japan-U.S. relationship this translates into grass roots activism. A report by the Japan Center for International Exchange highlights the regional underpinnings contributing to the Japan-U.S. relationship. Analyzing regional Japan-U.S. activities in both countries, the report has proved that grass roots activism is flourishing.



All over Japan and the United States, in fact, local communities are quietly but surely laying the groundwork for crosscultural interaction and an internationalist approach. Significant and encouraging signs include foreign culture programs, homestay committees, community internationalism classes, and informal forums between Japanese and Americans.

A continuing criticism of Japan-U.S. media coverage has been the fact that correspondents remain centered in the major metropolitan areas of New York, Washington, and of course Tokyo. This, combined with the language barrier, has led to an accusation of "ghetto living" which isolates the Japanese from the American community and vice versa. In the United States a concentration on beltway concerns, therefore, means that political frictions are constantly highlighted.

Tokyo coverage, on the other hand, virtually ignores Japanese regional issues and activities. Neither approach allows for an examination of government policies at the community and individual level. Nor is regional reporting a regular feature in the Japan-U.S. information flow.

A comparison of national and regional news reports typically underscores the difference a grass roots approach can make in ameliorating an information gap. Whereas the national press focuses on political rhetoric and implications, a regional newspaper is likely to interpret policy as it relates to local issues. In addition, where a national news report may condemn what is wrong with America or Japan, a regional newspaper will gladly run an article featuring the success of local business in overseas trade—what is right between America and Japan. To better grasp regional issues, therefore, journalists must move beyond proscribed boundaries to personally encounter broader and often milder reactions to perceived Japan-U.S. frictions.

Where grass roots momentum is concerned, the individual can play a powerful role in promoting more harmonious Japan-U.S. relations. My own homestay in Shizuoka Prefecture, for example, was at the home of a melon farmer who has spearheaded a local effort to offer homestays to foreign guests. A main inspiration



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behind his drive are his warm memories of his own student homestay in America. Offering his home, as well as encouraging his friends to do likewise, is his way of showing gratitude for a positive personal exchange. Another homestay in Iwate Prefecture was equally impressive in opening a door to everyday Japanese living. Here too my host recalled his visit to the United States, and the feeling of sincere welcome. Both homestays are examples of information flow at the grass roots level.

In the cacophony generated by acrimonious Japan-U.S. disputes, it is tempting to dismiss such personal encounters as minor matters. Yet ultimately people draw conclusions based on personal impressions and knowledge. When all data are weighed equally, it is the individual recollection of friendship or acceptance that tilts the information balance toward the positive.

Grass roots activism supposes that Americans and Japanese want to know one another as people rather than as oddities or adversaries. An accumulation of grass roots effort, no matter how small initially, eventually creates a groundswell of goodwill that can help temper perception gap frustrations.

But grass roots enthusiasm is just the beginning. Rapid changes in the world's geopolitical and socioeconomic order have meant that information flow is now in a race of catch-up to actual conditions. Much more than homestays are needed to provide a backdrop of reason in the changing world of Japan-U.S. relations.

Factors for emotional conflict between the two nations persist. While ordinary citizens can attempt a personal commitment to improving global relationships, political leadership, especially in Japan,

will be necessary to underline the effort. A probable result is that the voice of Japan will become increasingly heard in any information flow overseas.

For the time being, the responsibility for information flow must fall to the Japanese side. In addition to commercial ventures on the part of media companies, however, a more concerted effort among various information agencies and other suppliers of information will be necessary. Because the burden now rests with Japan to prove itself worthy of the word internationalist, it is up to the Japanese to sharpen their overseas communication skills and public relations strategies.

Where Japan and the United States go from here will require a commitment to information balance and a recognition that communication involves a two-way flow. Also needed is a willingness to seek specifics rather than remain satisfied with generalized assumptions. There's an English expression that one "can't see the wood for the trees." The implication is that too much emphasis on specifics, i.e. the trees, can distort the larger view, or the wood.

But where information flow from Japan is concerned, the closer look may provide the more accurate picture after all. The United States has seen enough of the wood. It's time both sides start looking at individual trees, or, in other words, to find our specific frame of reference in evaluating the flow of information from Japan. The future of Japan-U.S. relations depends on it.

*Catrien Ross heads a research and information firm specializing in U.S.-Japan relations and Pacific Rim energy issues. She publishes the newsletter Dialogue Japan.*