

Changes in the Japanese Press and Freedom of Speech

By Inoki Takenori

Enhancement and Spread of Knowledge

The Japanese press has undergone drastic changes over the past 20 to 30 years. Up until the 1970s, critical magazines of general interest, such as *Sekai*, *Chuo Koron*, *Tenbo* and *Asahi Journal*, boasted considerable readerships, particularly among students and intellectuals, and a special relationship, which may be called “trustful admiration,” existed between their writers and readers. The writers possessed and processed knowledge, while their ardent readers sought to share their knowledge. This was an era when the readers of critical magazines played a key role in molding public opinion. In those days, a person who excelled in a specialized academic sector often exerted enormous influence even when he/she wrote about social and political matters which were not his/her speciality. For example, there was a readership that strongly connected with the writings of a physicist concerning human life or politics, partly because they respected his reputation stemming from his achievements in his speciality.

Things have changed lately. It has transpired that a person who excels in one area could make erroneous or absurd remarks on other subjects due to a lack of knowledge of matters outside his speciality. One reason is that these days one is increasingly required to possess a considerably high level of specialized knowledge to hold forth on any political, economic or social matter. For example, when one surmises or makes forecasts concerning the future of such areas as free trade agreements, economic integration or pension reform, he will not be persuasive without detailed knowledge of their systems and the theoretical framework of economics. It is also difficult to talk about the future of China’s political situation without knowing the various problems facing

the Chinese economy. In a similar vein, simulation analysis based on several scenarios will be required to anticipate the flow of trade and finance in East Asia in the event of a contingency on the Korean peninsula. In Japan, there are fewer specialists on actual policy matters than in any other developed country. This is why the Japanese press finds itself hard-pressed to take up full-fledged debates on these issues. Not only do some editors lack the capabilities to evaluate theses on these issues, but some even avoid them on the grounds that excessively specialized discussions will not appeal to their readers.

Another reason, which may seem to conflict with the first one, is that people now find it much easier than 30 years ago to obtain general information on world affairs and numerical information, which means that information has been widespread among people and has become standardized. The standardization of knowledge, in turn, has resulted in a decline of the influence of intellectuals who had previously played the role of monopolistic import agents of knowledge and information.

On the other hand, the enhancement of professional knowledge and the spread of general knowledge have forced highbrow general interest magazines to appeal to the mass market in order to win as many readers as possible. This is shown by the fact that *Chuo Koron* and *Bungei Shunju*, which had previously targeted different readerships, are now edited with considerably overlapping readerships in mind.

While readers now find detailed and specialized arguments uninteresting, writers, for their part, have become increasingly cautious about making arguments as issues have become increasingly difficult. They even tend to avoid making enlightening remarks. It may be said that writers can no longer write, rather than do not write. It has become an extremely difficult task for

writers to accurately and understandably discuss current issues in their capacity as specialists, with general readers in mind. Specialization and the spread of knowledge have resulted in the disappearance of people who can make broad judgments and express opinions from professional viewpoints. It can be said that the venue where public opinion is formed, which is important for democracy, is gradually vanishing.

The decay of the power of forming public opinion harbors dangerous elements, since under such a condition people may think that the easiest way to activate public opinion is to advocate extreme opinions. I am wondering whether some magazines have lately been poisoned by simple ideology on the pretext that they have to make their positions clear. This is related to the fact that Japanese people, who are said to lack a good sense of balance, have the tendency to dislike middle-of-the-road arguments. They believe that moderation is a compromise and is not pure. But since humans live a compromised existence with inherent contradictions (they like competition but at the same time want equality, for example), their solutions cannot but be a compromise. People who refuse to accept the complex reality can hardly be spared the criticism that they are immature extremists.

The activation of the press should not be left to poisonous extreme opinions. Only commercialism, which has lapsed into the broker of hackneyed words, is fond of extreme opinions. Choosing between two conflicting opinions does require courage on certain occasions, but refraining from making an easy decision also requires courage. Only those members of the press who are well aware of this point have both intellectual integrity and justice, and can acquire the capacity to discover new concepts as well as problems.



Economic Policy and Economic Argument

Looking back on the economic policy arguments conducted in the postwar years in Japan, we can see that economists' remarks carried greater weight than now. In the 1950s and 1960s, government economists and those in academia, whether they were Marxists or non-Marxists, conducted full-fledged arguments on economic policies. This is in contrast with the present strange phenomenon of economists' theories losing effect despite their tremendous specialization. We cannot ignore the fact that economics, which is presupposed on human rationality, has in some way become less adequate as a tool for explaining actual economic behavior as it has become more detailed and strict. This is because actual social behavior is not necessarily dictated by economic rationality alone. People sometimes flatter some authorities. The human mind is always changeable.

Even so, economists are either specialists or technocrats and their remarks

should be respected as theories. As far as economic issues are concerned, only economists can present various options or scenarios coherently. The fundamentals of economics may not be able to reveal the truth regarding economic phenomena, but can still help to avoid serious blunders in planning or examining policies. There may be a period of time when plausible and powerful fallacious opinions control the human mind. But specialists have more knowledge than non-specialists in their specialized fields, and so they have enough power to check fallacious opinions (even though they cannot tell the "truth"), however plausible or powerful they may be.

Yet, there should justifiably be a system for checking whether economists assume responsibility for what they say. Economists' arguments had better be reviewed five or 10 years later so they can assume responsibility for what they argued or said. Setting aside those who are only preoccupied with hair-splitting arguments on economic theories without showing interest in actual economic policy matters, economists should be

assessed for what they say. At least, there should be a review of the "general outline" of their remarks on the direction of the economy. Since perfectly accurate calculations and judgments are not possible, it is important that economists' judgments or remarks should be reviewed in terms of whether the "general outline" of their judgments or remarks was correct or not.

American economist Ronald Harry Coase discussed freedom of speech in a paper in the *American Economic Review* (1974). He pointed out that the marketing of poisons or harmful foodstuffs is subject to severe punishment, but the dissemination of fallacious or vicious information is tolerated.

Indeed, a single word could ruin a person's life just as a spoonful of poison could kill him. Accordingly, it is inadequate for the material poison and verbal poison to be subject to punishment according to completely different theories. But people in contemporary society are extremely sensitive to controlling verbal damage, because it involves oppression of freedom of speech.

When economists, including myself, talk about analysis of current situations or prediction, we can hardly escape this problem. Some severe critics may say it is too late to hold economists responsible for what they have said. Distrust of economists is reflected by the complaint that 10 economists get you 11 opinions.

Looking back on postwar economic arguments with this point in mind, we notice several interesting examples. One is criticism and counter-criticism of the income-doubling plan, one of the most famous arguments in Japan's postwar economic history. Another is the debate on the period of pattern transition that took place around 1962 immediately after the debate on the income-doubling plan. Then, prior to the 1965 recession, debate started among economists over whether or not the Japanese economy was undergoing constitutional changes. Economists were divided into optimists and pessimists. The pessimists thought that there would inevitably be a great reaction to the expansion of capital investment that continued to about 1962. The optimists believed in the sustenance of growth on the grounds that the Japanese economy was still young.

Generally speaking, Japanese social scientists preferred pessimism on any subject. The representative of the pessimists in the economic debates above was Ryu Shintaro, who authored the best-selling book *Hanamizake no Keizai*, in which he judged that although Japanese were reveling in economic growth, Japan's actual economy was unsound and risky.

On the other hand, the optimists were represented by Shimomura Osamu and Uchida Tadao, who praised the potential power of the Japanese economy and asserted that what Japan needed was fiscal and monetary policies that would help the economy to demonstrate its competence. In other words, they argued that there would be no problem if sufficient demand were matched with supply capabilities.

The 1965 recession ended in a short time and the Japanese economy again roared along the growth track. But it is

true that economic growth was not a paradise free from problems. This debate is a good example – analysis of the current situation by social science should be evaluated five or 10 years later based on fair judgments.

■ Freedom of Speech

The complexity of the problem lies in the fact that no clear distinction can be drawn between what economists know or don't know as specialists and what social values they have as citizens. The debate on values and freedom of speech still remains a big problem however much social science has advanced. The right of individuals to freely express their ideas or values as long as they do not run counter to public order and accepted social customs is the fundamental prerequisite for a liberal democracy. I wonder what kind of problems concerning freedom of speech prevail in contemporary Japan.

"Agree to disagree" is an expression regarded as summing up the very contradictory and difficult mental attitude of "coexisting with enemies," which is the foundation of a liberal democracy. Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset said in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930) that liberal democracy, which demonstrates the most enhanced will of coexistence in politics, is a generous political thought which expresses to an extreme the determination to respect neighbors or members of the minority. Ortega emphasized that it is incredible that mankind has reached such a beautiful, contradictory, acrobatic and unnatural idea.

Liberal democracy is intrinsically preconditioned by a difficult, unnatural mindset, as Ortega said, so that it could be easily abandoned. It has failed to take root in many countries. About the time when Ortega wrote *The Revolt of the Masses*, the spirit of engaging in politics together with opponents was almost dead in the former Soviet Union, Europe and Japan. The masses, who were homogeneous to the bone, leaned on social power and began to oppress

and exterminate all opponents. Ortega took note of such a tendency and observed that the masses do not desire to coexist with those who are not the masses. Rejection of coexistence is nothing more than the acceptance of only one value.

We are reminded of Ortega's remark when we reflect on the Japanese people's recent sense of speech. It is not surprising that there are arguments about the interpretation of history. But these days, we glimpse some moves to oppress the speech of people who have different opinions. It is said that the pressures brought to bear on individuals by such a general atmosphere are not limited to speech, and I hear that such pressures occasionally appear even in voluntary activities. Some people point out that Japanese society is now filled with a climate in which people who stay away from performing good deeds are branded as sub-human and that the spontaneous nature of good deeds is being lost. Such an atmosphere transforms people into automatons that constantly utter good words and conduct good deeds. But each person can decide what is right or wrong only because he/she chooses his/her expressions or actions of his/her own free will. A good deed without spontaneous motivation is no different from a stone which falls according to physical law.

In human society, however, evil is often created under the guise of good. The genuine good is subtle and has nothing to do with praise from others. Good is transformed to evil when boasting of itself. Any action believed to be good can no longer be good when it is mingled with compulsion or pride.

It may be inappropriate to make arguments on freedom of speech from such viewpoints alone. But, while it takes a dramatic political change to win freedom, the loss of freedom progresses quietly, gradually and almost unnoticed. And, suddenly a vanguard of activists who resort to force, like the Red Guards in China's Cultural Revolution, emerges and creates a horrible situation under which even sympa-

Photo: Kyodo News

thy, a casual glance and a sigh are subjected to severe punishment. People belonging to the generation which experienced the ideological oppression in prewar Japan and the rise of Marxism in a certain period of time in postwar Japan have learned how important voluntary and free thought is. But people belonging to the generations which did not experience the era of ideological repression surprisingly lack the will to coexist with other people and are thus susceptible to the poison of uniformity.

■ On Recent Incidents

Finally, I would like to refer to a recent court action against the publication of a weekly magazine related to the freedom of speech and to point out that the real facts about freedom of speech have been undergoing changes in recent years.

On March 16, the Tokyo District Court made a provisional injunction against the publishing firm Bungeishunju, prohibiting the publication, scheduled for March 17, of the March 25th issue of its weekly magazine *Shukan Bunshun*, which contained a story about the private life of former foreign minister Tanaka Makiko's eldest daughter.* The rampancy of articles openly violating individuals' privacy carried in the publications of some media organizations have resulted in the filing of libel suits against publishers. The Tokyo District Court found the *Shukan Bunshun* article on Tanaka's daughter had violated her privacy and decided on an injunction as an exceptional measure.

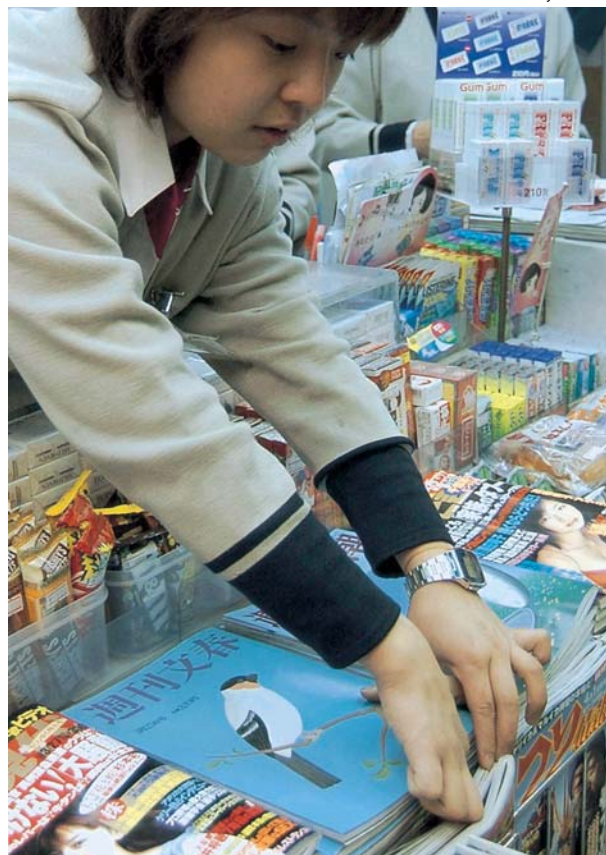
The Japanese media expressed concern that the court ruling threatened to violate freedom of expression and newspapers carried editorials to the effect that freedom of expression is the right which constitutes the foundation of democracy guaranteeing people's right to know, and that excessive restrictions on publication would lead to a weakening of the media. Some media organizations blamed both sides, asserting that *Shukan Bunshun* had openly violated privacy and so the Tokyo District Court injunc-

tion banning the article could not be helped, though excessive restrictions on speech atrophied people's speech.

These editorial comments were undoubtedly conscientious but their view that excessive restrictions would have a negative effect on media organizations is a little too simplistic.

Sato Takumi, a professor at the Faculty of Education of Kyoto University who is known as a researcher of media history, commented that the media can counter such an exercise of power as the *Shukan Bunshun* case in various ways. Paradoxically, he said, the time when the media was forced to express opinions only indirectly was the time when magazine journalism was at its peak. As an example, he cited the Germany of the era of Otto von Bismarck in the 19th century when speech was controlled. During the Bismarck era, freedom of speech was not applied to socialist publications as an exceptional measure, which in turn ironically activated the socialist mass media and enhanced its popularity. Critic Tachibana Takashi referred to the court injunction against the weekly's article as a "terrorist action." In fact, he wrote his comment in a challenging way, using indirect expressions, and he fully demonstrated the effect and appeal of the indirect writing style.

Media organizations should not be afraid of the old-fashioned open censorship like this case. Instead, the media should make an issue of "subtle censorship." Such a method as making a request to a company for "voluntary" cancellation of an advertisement is an



The March 25th issue of *Shukan Bunshun* was removed from store shelves after a provisional injunction

example of "subtle censorship." Sato pointed out that consideration should be given to the fact that in view of the deluge of vague and dubious information on the Internet, such a court method as an injunction could have a boomerang effect of giving credibility to that dubious information. It can be said that the problem is that, by having taken up such a trivial issue as the divorce of a politician's daughter, *Shukan Bunshun* unnecessarily prodded the court to ban the publication of the article on the grounds that speech must have credibility because of its public nature. **15**

Inoki Takenori is a professor of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies. He specializes in labor economics, economic thought and the Japanese economy. His research focuses on public servants, white-collar workers and the development of human resources.

*Note : *Shukan Bunshun* was ordered to halt the distribution of that issue after 740,000 of the magazine's 770,000 print run had already been shipped to stores. The incident was given extensive coverage in the Japanese media as the article was about the divorce of Tanaka Makiko's daughter. Tanaka is a daughter of the late Tanaka Kakuei, an extremely influential Prime Minister of Japan from 1972 to 1974.