

The Joys and Sorrows of Reporting on Japan

By Mary Ann Maskery

For a foreign correspondent in Japan, language can be a problem, but not necessarily a major one. Coping with a different culture can be a problem, but a fascinating one.

The real concern for the correspondent is playing the middleman, walking a line between two cultures. Explaining Japanese issues to a foreign audience is difficult enough, but getting the Japanese to understand foreign procedures is the real test. It often means trying to convince people that a different perception is not necessarily a hostile one. Let me explain.

Four years ago, I was asking a Toyota spokesman if a Detroit TV news team could do some taping inside the Toyota plant.

It was back when the auto export issue was making daily headlines and Japanese auto makers' sensibilities were bridleing.

The Detroit crew was to arrive the following week and I was acting as an intermediary.

I knew Toyota was camera shy. And I knew it was short notice. But I asked. After three days of phone calls that never went beyond polite non-committal remarks, I was told that the top management would be in the U.S. the following week, why didn't they interview them there?

That wasn't the point, I explained. The Detroit people simply wanted to portray a Japanese production line, so could the less-than-top management handle it?

They would be very busy next week, the spokesman said. And besides, next week, part of the plant was being renovated and it would not be appropriate to have cameras there.

They don't need to show the whole plant, I said. What about a section that was not being renovated?

At that point the tired voice on the other end of the line took on a note of desperation, "and I won't be here next week either," he said. "I'm going out of the country tomorrow."

I remember the episode with much amusement and some sympathy for the

poor man confronted with the task of delivering a Japanese "no" to a *gaijin* (foreigner).

But I also remember it as illustrative of doing business in Japan for a foreign journalist and all the problems of dealing with a different time frame, a different attitude toward the press, a keen sensitivity toward criticism, and certainly a different concept of who speaks for whom.

Too much and too little

On the face of it, the request from the Detroit group was absurd. They were asking for too much on too little notice. They also wanted to just 'drop by' the home of a 'typical auto worker,' and could that, they asked, please be arranged in two days.

Their time reference was a world away, in a not-atypical American news room,

accustomed to moving the same day on an idea generated in a morning production meeting.

Two days might constitute advance booking in the States, but in Japan, there's a different tempo, a greater formality and even orchestration.

But it wasn't simply time that made the difference. The Detroit news team did eventually get their 'typical worker in the home' interview, because the United Auto Workers Union in Detroit sent a formal request to the Auto Workers Union in Japan, asking for cooperation on the TV request, and the Japanese union agreed to honor a petition from a fellow labor organization.

In the U.S., a request from a TV station might have carried more weight in the first place. There, the public's belief in the press or media has taken some battering in recent political years, but it is still strong.



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Business leaders or politicians may well try to manipulate or dodge a probing reporter, but in the end, there is a sense that dodging may not serve their interests quite as much in the long run.

In Japan, it is easier to resist exposure by declining behind a barrier of formality and protocol. That is often done on the assumption that exposure in any media, particularly foreign media, is first of all unnecessary, and secondly, inviting of rude or even destructive criticism. That undoubtedly was in the minds of Japanese auto executives four years ago when there was such an outcry over unemployment rates in Detroit and what looked then like the disintegration of the Detroit plants under a Japanese onslaught. During that time, a Nissan spokesman, who for the most part was very responsive to the press, was chiding American reporters, warning them that he had people in the U.S. checking newspapers and broadcasts to make sure the news reports from Japan were fair.

In that heated environment, it seemed that the only 'fair' report, according to the auto companies, was a blithely uncritical one. Spokesmen from both industry and government started to take positions that were increasingly defensive. It was almost impossible to ask even a factual question on the issue, without getting a response encrusted with what sounded like an 'official pitch,' a patriotic barrage more than an answer. (That is still true today.)

Fair and uncritical

The feeling that 'fair' equates with 'uncritical' is not an isolated one. After all, as in most countries, it is one thing for a Japanese to criticize a Japanese (as long as he does it in Japanese as the author of *Japan Unmasked* learned so convincingly). It is quite another matter when a foreigner observes from the sidelines.

Most people resent foreign criticism, but in Japan perhaps that is a bit more apparent. It is not unusual for foreign reporters to get a slap on the wrists from the *Gaimusho* (Foreign Ministry) when they appear to overstep what is assumed to be their bounds. It is not unusual for officials to avoid interviews with foreign reporters for fear their questions will be too pointed, or there to be agreement in advance to avoid selected sensitive areas.

The concern is not totally unfounded. Certainly, foreigners who are not part of the system are not kept to its limits and niceties. But the concern over the Detroit TV news team certainly proved to be misplaced.

The fact that the news people were from Detroit aroused fear in the first place. But then, in a classic American local-TV news maneuver, the group brought along an unemployed auto worker to get his impressions of Japanese employment prac-



tices, a move that certainly put great strain on the gracious forbearance of the host Japanese union.

The results, however, were not negative. The group took home with them, unemployed worker as well, loud 'Japan as Number One' praise. There was some criticism, yes, but the overriding impression from a series of reports that was carried on three newscasts each day for one week, was one long alleluia.

That was true, I believe, of most of the reporting on the auto issue at that time. The overall impression presented to the foreign audience was positive.

Reports, such as the NBC documentary, "If Japan Can, Why Can't We," were far more critical of American business practice than resentful of Japanese success. The intent of most of those reports was an instructive one, an explanation of the phenomenon that was overtaking American industry, in particular the car industry.

Exploitation

Criticism of Japanese methods increased as the Japanese industry started digging in its heels in the face of American demands for 'voluntary' restraints. But even then, there was, equally, criticism of the table-thumping practices of American Congressmen who knew how to exploit a good campaign issue when they found one.

The unending reminder that "there is strong protectionist sentiment in Congress" and "that it might get out of hand during a campaign if the Japanese don't

respond" proved tedious to American as well as Japanese ears.

The posturing was obvious. But so was the posturing of Japanese industry spokesmen who became not only defensive, but indignant.

When the statistics on Japanese exports to the U.S. first started taking quantum leaps, the industry comments were soft spoken, almost apologetic, with assurances that this was undoubtedly an aberration due to a momentary setback for the Detroit companies, but certainly it wouldn't last beyond the year.

One year later, when the issue was becoming more controversial in the U.S., statements from the Japanese industry stiffened. What may have been described as an 'aberration' 12 months before now appeared as the obvious and just results of free enterprise.

In the face of two unbending sides, most American news reports tended to slap both of them. The results, again, for Japanese industry, were not necessarily negative.

Even in Detroit, for all the attention on Japanese car-bashing parties, there was a growing awareness of, and appreciation for, Japanese skills and efficiency. In Detroit, probably more than in most cities, newspapers now carry reports on general Japanese issues and cultural events. The auto issue may have aroused passions, but it also made a normally provincial public take notice. In the long run, that has to be a positive factor for Japan. It certainly is welcomed by

reporters who have, for years, tried in vain to convince their editors back home that American readers might be, and certainly should be, more interested in what takes place in Japan.

But the auto issue hasn't ended yet. And there is still a tinge of defensiveness whenever an industry spokesman or government official is asked to comment on exports.

Frequently even a simple answer is coupled with the 'pitch,' which is any number of variations of 'I told you so' on the increase in car prices on the American market since export curbs were introduced.

But the intensity of the issue has passed and the Japanese industry has not really emerged as the 'villain' in foreign eyes, hopefully proving that foreign news reports can be both critical and fair.

Still, the outside-inside factor in Japanese society makes even the appearance of criticism an issue.

Criticism for perspective

It takes a critical stance to provide perspective. No government or industry spokesman can afford to do that, anywhere. But even the natural opposition in Japan hesitates when the interviewer is a foreigner. In Japan, generally, it is the academics, far removed from the action, who are free to comment.

It was interesting to note a recent book review, advising readers to pay close attention to the essays by academic authorities as they were said to be far more informative than the otherwise bland government

essays contained in the same text.

No-one bound by the identity of a group wants to take the responsibility of the group name in speaking out. So, normally, no one speaks, unless it is the off-the-record, anonymous comment. I often suspect that there are more unattributed reports coming out of Tokyo as a result than out of the Pentagon. Trial balloons become an occupational hazard, and, unfortunately, a guessing game.

The tendency is exaggerated when a camera is introduced, eliminating any possibility of anonymity. It is hard not to smile when a New York editor calls up on what might be a controversial U.S.-Japan issue and asks if a 'government spokesman' will go on camera and explain the 'government view' (usually that day).

The only way to get a 'spokesman' usually, is to go to the top. That is true also in the U.S., where it is simple courtesy to interview the president of a firm if he is available. But if the president is dull, not particularly eloquent, or not versed on the details of a specific project, it is still possible to accept a few official comments from the leadership, and then concentrate on the individual who seems to know, or at least can evaluate an issue. In Japan, that gambit doesn't work.

When names are quoted, or faces shown, it's usually the top or nothing. The practice of presenting only the group position can go to extremes, at least from a foreign perspective.

Usually, when a major event occurs, the call goes out from New York to round up world opinion or reaction. It was interest-

ing to note a particular wire copy report after the U.S. hostages were released from Iran. It was a collection of comments, congratulations and salutations from world leaders to the American president. It included the words of Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Helmut Schmidt in West Germany, Giscard d'Estaing in France, and in Japan, a statement from the Foreign Ministry.

Frustrations of anonymity

The anonymity is understandable, given the group structure of Japanese society, but it frustrates the reporter trying to convey a sense of Japan to the outside world. A Western reader or viewer is accustomed to seeing names attached, and faces of individuals.

Prime Minister Nakasone has changed much of the anonymous nature of political stories, being the most personable of prime ministers in recent history.

But for most stories, it is the reporter's task to 'personalize' an issue, if only for the purpose of arousing interest.

When the Detroit news people finally got to see a Japanese assembly line, they did what was expected of them back in Detroit, the obligatory interview with selected workers, asking them about their jobs and their loyalty to the company. The self-conscious smiles of the men suddenly pulled out of the group and the obvious determination to say only what was politely acceptable didn't add much authenticity to the piece. But at least they were individuals.

The reporter had to add his own perspective. It was a matter of culling observations and impressions, describing in effect the 'local color,' and trying to read between the lines.

It is what all reporters do, trying to interpret one culture for another, quite different one, back home. Sometimes the results appear critical, sometimes not. Always, ideally, the approach has at least the intent of objectivity.

For all the concentration on facts, figures, and quotes, however, the most a reporter can hope to convey is an impression. Details slide away, a sense remains. That is not only true for a television audience, but for print readers as well.

The more personal, the more vivid the report, the more lasting the impression. That is the headache for the foreign reporter trying to cover issues in Japanese society that are not simply complex, but foreign in nature, at least to an American audience. The results, at times, are simplistic. But, overall, the lasting impression of Japanese society portrayed by the foreign press is, I think, positive, if not uncritical. ●

