

# Japanese vs. U.S. Journalism

By Matsuyama Yukio

Since I spent 12 of my 40 years as a newspaper reporter in the United States, I think I am in a good position to make a comparison between Japanese and U.S. journalism. My conclusion is that all countries have newspapers that suit their culture and national character. It can be said that the similarities in newspapers in Japan and the United States stem from the common principle of democracy and national character, while the differences reflect different social and cultural backgrounds.



## Similarities

Let me first of all look at the similarities. In both countries newspapers have freedom of speech and are completely independent of the government. Furthermore, the constitutions of the two countries provide the maximum guarantee for this freedom of speech, so newspapers are able to engage in free-speech activities as, in the words of U.S. journalist Walter Lippmann (1889 to 1974), the watchdog not of the government but of democracy.

In totalitarian countries, and in some free countries, also, it is not unusual for newspapers faced with business difficulties to turn to the government for financial support. In both Japan and the United States, however, newspapers have complete economic independence

thanks to their revenues from sales, advertisements, and other projects, so whatever happens they are outside the control of the government.

Second, in both Japan and the United States newspapers enjoy a relatively high social status, and newspaper and television companies are very popular among new university graduates looking for employment. This was not the case in Japan before World War II, when newspaper reporters had a rather low social status and graduates from top-rate universities hardly ever entered journalism. Indeed, the occupation of newspaper reporter was considered an obstacle when it came to such things as marriage or renting a house.

Compared with their counterparts in other countries, journalists in Japan and the United States are fortunate in being able to easily make contact with their sources, whether government or private. In particular, it is easy for Japanese journalists to approach people in powerful positions. In this respect, they are probably more happy than journalists in any other country in the world, including the United States.

For example, Cabinet ministers in Japan hold press conferences twice a week after their meetings and in many cases do not refuse to meet with reporters who turn up at their homes late at night. Veteran reporters are even able to ride with ministers in their cars to get comments or can call them on the phone. The vice-minister for foreign affairs holds a press conference at 5:00 p.m. every day to explain the important issues of the day and answer questions. The heads of bureaus and sections in government ministries accept reporters without appointments.

Third, journalism in Japan and the United States has the power to influence

politics in a major way through its coverage and editorials. To prevent any concentration of power, most democratic countries follow the principle of separating the three powers of legislature, executive, and judiciary and enable the people to keep a check on authority as a whole through freedom of speech. In Japan and the United States in particular, the mass media, known as the fourth estate, sometimes displays an influence just as strong as that of the other three powers over decisions about the direction of the country and the mood of society.

Without the fighting spirit of newspapers, such scandals as Watergate in the United States and Lockheed, Recruit, and Sagawa Kyubin in Japan probably would never have come to light. And undoubtedly, had it not been for the pioneering campaign of newspapers, the government and business in Japan would never have gotten off their backsides to tackle the pollution problem.

Fourth, when John Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon in the U.S. presidential election 30 years or so ago, it was said that the images television conveyed played a decisive role. In Japan, too, some people have claimed that the government of Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro, inaugurated in 1993, was created by television. In other words, television has come to exert an enormous influence on the popularity of politicians.

In neither Japan nor the United States has the appearance of television led to a decline of newspapers. They have succeeded in coexisting peacefully by displaying their own distinctive qualities—the promptness of television and the analysis of newspapers. In Japan's case, most commercial television networks have strong personnel and financial ties with a newspaper.

While Japanese newspapers experienced steady growth from the second half of the 19th century, supported by the rise in the standard of living and lit-



Chief Cabinet Secretary Takemura Masayoshi responding to questions during a regularly scheduled press conference

Photo: Kyodo News Service

50,000, and are not very keen about reporting the news from Washington or abroad. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* are essentially local papers, also.

In contrast, most of Japan's major newspapers are national. The very same articles that are printed in Tokyo are sent by facsimile for simultaneous printing in Hokkaido and Kyushu, an extremely effective way of doing business. And one feature of Japan's newspaper world is that while national papers have developed, each prefecture also has at least one local newspaper that flourishes.

eracy, they achieved especially spectacular growth under the U.S. Occupation after World War II, when they were seen as the "backbone of democracy and champion of freedom." Consequently Japanese newspapers bear more similarity to the newspapers of the United States than to those of any other country. Moreover, it can be said that their constant goal is to achieve the power that U.S. newspapers have.

## Differences

At the same time, newspapers in both countries have several conspicuous differences. First, almost all U.S. newspapers are local. Certainly the *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *USA Today* are read throughout the nation, but these are exceptions. About 85% of U.S. newspapers are small local papers with a circulation of fewer than

Compared with their U.S. counterparts, local newspapers in Japan in general are more high-class, avoiding the sensational and carrying plenty of national and international news.

Second, while U.S. newspapers have a very clear political complexion, generally supporting either the Democratic or Republican parties, Japanese newspapers follow the motto of nonpartisanship. During presidential election campaigns in the United States, although some newspapers refrain from making their position clear, most editorials state support for a particular candidate, be it George Bush, Bill Clinton or Ross Perot. In Japan, however, the principles of journalism are neutrality and nonpartisanship, so during election campaigns newspaper editorials state abstract views, for example, saying that voters should select candidates who are "clean, precise, have clear policies and an inter-

national sense."

Non-Japanese probably think that this approach is lukewarm and leaves something to be desired, but I think it reflects the national character of the Japanese. If a Japanese newspaper were to reveal its support for a certain party or candidate, the other candidates might be outraged and refuse further coverage by that paper, or some readers might claim that the paper was biased and stop their subscriptions.

Third, advertisements occupy an overwhelming share in U.S. newspapers, accounting for around 75% of revenue, compared with 25% from sales. In Japan, advertisements and sales account for about 50% each, and advertisements take up much less space than ordinary articles.

Because of the many advertisements, U.S. newspapers tend to be extremely bulky. The Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, for example, runs to about 500 pages, which means that reading it in a single day is absolutely impossible. This is a clear waste of resources. In contrast, the morning editions of Japanese newspapers usually run to about 32 pages, which is thought to be a suitable length for reading in less than one hour.

Fourth, in almost all cases Japanese journalists join a newspaper immediately upon graduating from a university, undergo an apprenticeship in the provinces, and then join the political, economic, social, or some other desk at the head office. Merit is taken into account to an extent, but mainly promotions and salary raises are determined by seniority. Eventually the Japanese journalist accepts a managerial post and stops writing. There are very few reporters who follow the American course, making a name for themselves at a local newspaper and then moving on to a major paper and continuing to write even when they are old.

Fifth, U.S. journalism gives the strong impression of being a talent competition among individuals. Within each newspaper company, individual reporters vie with one another over their abilities. In contrast, Japanese newspapers, which are huge organizations, place the empha-

sis on teamwork, with everyone cooperating to put the pages together. In many cases, for example, a group of younger reporters will gather the information for a main article on a political situation, and then a senior reporter will pen it.

Sixth, until the establishment of the coalition government of Prime Minister Hosokawa last year, Japanese politics consisted of virtual one-party rule by the Liberal Democratic Party, and a deep collusion took root between the government, bureaucracy and business. Consequently, the mass media instinctively adopted an antigovernment posture to prevent Japan from leaning to one side. However, with the formation of the coalition government, which includes the Social Democratic Party of Japan, the mass media probably will take a more fair and just approach in their criticism—in other words, a more American approach.

And the seventh point, the last but certainly not the least, concerns the major difference in the way the two countries achieved their freedom of speech. While the United States fought hard and shed much blood to attain this right, Japan received it suddenly, almost as a windfall, after its defeat in World War II.

Unfortunately many of Japan's leaders after the war, or their disciples, have been people with prewar values. These people had absolutely no sympathy with the thoughts of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, but nevertheless the United States saw them as friends in the struggle against communism. They spent little time reflecting on the speech control that was enforced in Japan before and during the war or on their own role in whipping up jingoistic sentiment for Japan to "invade the continent" and "annihilate the United States and Britain." At the bottom of their hearts, such people still think that newspapers should be not monitors of the government but, as in the old days, "assistants of imperial rule."

Younger Japanese, meanwhile, take freedom of speech for granted, rather like air and water, and do not feel at all very thankful for the glory of freedom. So they have no spirit to fight to the death over any violation of freedom.

## Common issues

Finally, I would like to mention some common issues for the mass media in Japan and the United States. First, because journalism involves competition among companies in the same business, there is always a danger that reporting will go too far. Democratic politics must have a high degree of transparency, but I think that some moderateness is necessary when the curtains are fully opened. For example, if Henry Kissinger's visit to China had been revealed in newspapers beforehand, the restoration of diplomatic ties between the United States and China probably would not have happened. Given the fact that both Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were to die three or four years later, rather than criticizing the secret diplomacy, I would prefer to praise it for having led, at the eleventh hour, to one of the major events of this century.

The same goes for the privacy of politicians. The three men who have scored especially well as presidents of the United States in modern times—Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and Kennedy—all had lovers. I certainly do not condone this fact, but at the same time I wonder how history would have turned out if the mass media at the time had sensationally reported these affairs.

I have no intention of belittling the question of the morality of politicians. But if we are too aggressive in pursuing our "right to know," we will end up with a controlled society with hidden cameras and wiretapping devices everywhere. The danger then would be that talented people with political skills would turn their backs on public office, saying that they did not want a job that entailed the full exposure of their private lives, and politics would be left to the small fry.

Second, there is a tendency for the mass media, and especially television, to promote trivialism and emotionalism. Rather than discussing a politician's foresightedness, resolution, coordination and negotiating skills, and sense of responsibility, they play up such things as his smile, the pattern on his necktie, or the charm of his family life.

Third, because there are no organizations keeping a check on newspapers, except of course for the long-term criticism of readers, journalism tends to be rather smug. It is essential for newspapers, therefore, not to neglect the practice of always being strict toward themselves. In the United States, the *Washington Post*, for example, introduced an ombudsman system more than 20 years ago. This paper adopts such policies as carrying outsiders' criticisms of its articles.

In Japan, too, the *Asahi Shimbun* recently established a special committee for monitoring its articles. The members of this committee, which includes a former chief justice of the Supreme Court, a former female Cabinet minister, and a former editor of a sports newspaper, meet once a month to make requests of the paper from the perspective of its readers. In addition, the *Asahi Shimbun* carries a column of criticisms of its articles by outside intellectuals once a week. At a time when newspapers themselves have enormous power and the public's watch on papers is becoming increasingly severe, such efforts are essential.

A pet theory of mine is that journalism serves as the sauce of democracy. I have in mind not Worcestershire sauce but the kind of sauce that goes with, for example, French cuisine. If the sauce is bad, or there is not enough of it, then however good the meat or fish is, the cooking itself perishes. Totalitarian countries can boast about their superb airports or facilities for the aged, but they will not be attractive because the cooking lacks sauce.

The cooking will also perish, however, if the sauce is too strong or overflows. Since freedom of speech is a central pillar supporting democracy, it is true to say that raising the quality of the mass media is the most important issue in building an attractive democratic system.

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