Japan

The warmth of the herd

Walter Hamilton

A black limousine approached along a narrow street of clipped hedges and freshly-swept garden paths and stopped outside the home of Yoshiyuki Kono, a middle-aged salary man plucked from anonymity in one of Japan's most spectacular, and ill-founded, trials by media.

For the three executives of the prestigious *Asahi* newspaper, this call was a humiliating duty they wanted to get over and done with as quickly as possible. Sensing their discomfort and alert to the least hint of insincerity, the shattered Kono brusquely pointed them towards the living room. Silently, the three dark-suited executives assembled in a row on the *tatami* mat floor and bowed low in apology towards the man whom the *Asahi*, and most of Japan's news media, had branded as a crackpot killer just a few months earlier.

The investigation of the sarin nerve gas release in the city of Matsumoto in 1994, when seven people were killed and Kono's own wife was left paralysed, marked a low point for both the Japanese police and the media. Based on weak circumstantial evidence, the police focused on an unlikely suspect—an ordinary salary man with a fancy for old Volkswagens and no criminal record. Reporters, feeding off police innuendo, turned the innocent Kono into a pariah, despite the fact he was never charged. Meanwhile, both the law and press missed the real culprits—the Aum Shinrikyo religious cult which, a year later, would unleash a deadly sarin attack on the Tokyo subway.

The Matsumoto episode highlights some important characteristics of the Japanese news media and the society they serve. While the law places few restraints on the right to gather and publish information, the exercise of a genuinely independent journalism is sometimes thwarted by other

Losing control

factors, such as the intense pressure to match competitors; the habit of Japanese reporters to work in groups; strong links between journalists and their official news sources; and a highly developed public taste for scandal. These factors don't always make the country's news media ineffective or irresponsible, but when contemplating the advantages in size, diversity and sophistication of the Japanese newspaper and broadcasting industries, it is well to remember Yoshiyuki Kono.

A huge market

Japan has one of the biggest newspaper markets in the world, with a daily circulation of 72.4 million copies. That is 576 newspapers per one thousand population—the second highest diffusion rate after Norway, and 2.5 times the rate in the United States. In the years 1950–85, newspaper production in Japan outstripped population growth three to one. There are now 107 general-readership newspapers made up of five national dailies, three regional papers and 99 local papers. Between two and five newspapers are competing in every market.

The Japanese passion for newspapers can be put down to near universal literacy, high urbanisation and the cultural imperative of a people who feel they need to keep themselves informed in order to belong. Surveys which find that 90 per cent of Japanese regard themselves as middle class reflect the wide penetration of a shared standard of information via the mass media (Feldman 1993).

An abundance of newspapers, though, does not necessarily signify a market abundant with choice. In content and presentation Japan's major dailies are remarkably alike. This is due, in part, to the fact that 99 per cent of general-readership papers are sold by subscription and delivered to the home or office (Haruhara 1997; Amenomori 1997). There is little scope for selling additional copies of a one-off 'scoop' on the streets. Editors, it seems, live more in fear of missing a story which the other papers have, than in hope of publishing something which the others have ignored (Fujiwara 1997). This culture keeps the 'herd' together, closely watching each other's moves and trying to match them.

Television too, is a dominant fixture in the lives of the Japanese. Virtually every household owns a television—they are often found in

offices and restaurants and even in taxis. Almost one in three homes is connected to a dish to receive satellite TV. Cable television, though comparatively slow to develop, now reaches millions more. Foreign news broadcasts, including BBC World and CNN, are widely available in the Japanese language, and NHK also carries original news bulletins from the United States, China, France, South Korea, and several other countries.

But, while the Japanese public tell pollsters they regard newspapers as 'trustworthy' and 'reliable', they perceive television as 'a medium for quick information' (Shimbun Kenkyu 1989). Stations invest heavily in 'live' coverage of breaking news, with regular doses of crime, accidents, earthquakes and typhoons. Even high-quality documentaries seek to inform their viewers rather than challenge them. This may be explained by the fact that the main source of ideas and planning for documentaries on commercial television is Dentsu Corporation—the world's biggest advertising agency (Westney 1996).

Behind the safety of the 'herd' and the predominance of 'facts', over critical analysis, lies a unique system of press clubs. Every government ministry, city hall, court, police headquarters and major economic organisation has a press club on its premises. Press club journalists eat and drink together and practice what is often described as 'pack journalism'. The physical confinement of the 'pack' means its members will notice immediately when one journalist is missing, and will all rush off to try to match the 'scoop'. The journalists' fear of censure hands a powerful control to the organisations that host the clubs. Those members who break ranks can find themselves cut out of essential information briefings and effectively unable to do their jobs.

There are two major news agencies, Kyodo News and Jiji Press, which conduct both domestic and international newsgathering. Four of the national dailies, the *Asahi*, *Yomiuri*, *Mainichi* and *Nihon Keizai*, have English-language editions. The *Japan Times*, which publishes only in English, was founded in 1897. The only party-political daily of any note is the *Akahata* (the Communist Party paper). Foreign newspapers such as the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and the *International Herald Tribune* have comparatively small circulations, though magazines such as *TIME* and *Newsweek*, which are among more than thirty foreign publications with Japanese-language editions, enjoy a wider readership.

Circulation of Japanese newspapers, daily editions

	Morning	Evening
<i>Yomiuri Shimbun</i>	10,209,977	4,268,331
<i>Asahi Shimbun</i>	8,287,310	4,174,348
<i>Mainichi Shimbun</i>	3,961,301	1,846,567
<i>Nihon Keizai Shimbun</i>	3,019,783	1,659,195
<i>Sankei Shimbun</i>	1,961,869	911,502
<i>Chunichi Shimbun</i>	2,661,168	758,475
<i>Hokkaido Shimbun</i>	1,228,890	751,739
<i>Nishi-Nippon Shimbun</i>	847,295	192,394

Source: *Nihon Shinbun Kyokai*, 1999

Control gives way to conformity

Modern newspapers date from the 1870s when Japan was starting to open to the west. The Meiji oligarches initially encouraged the press because of its ability to spread new learning, but then turned against press freedom as newspapers began clamouring for representative government. Many papers were begun in support of new political parties, although they found that this inevitably limited their readership. The *Yomiuri*, established in Tokyo as the first paper for the common people, was also hamstrung by its own partisan politics. When the *Yomiuri*'s newly built offices were destroyed in the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923, the *Asahi* and the *Mainichi*—two newspapers founded in the merchant-city of Osaka along strictly commercial lines—stole a march on the field (Lee 1985). 'Impartiality' in the treatment of news, as a declared policy, went hand-in-hand with commercial viability, and a new era of mass newspapers was born.

When Japan went to war against Russia, and then expanded its empire in China, the national press cheered the military on. Circulations boomed as papers competed furiously to 'scoop' the latest troop movements (Young 1998). (For future generations of Japanese journalists the term 'scoop' became synonymous with 'being first', rather than necessarily 'being original'.) However, support for expansion abroad coexisted, in the press, with advocacy of universal suffrage and democratic reforms at home. These two postures reflected the popular mood (Lee 1985).

The authorities reacted sharply against the anti-government temper of the press in domestic affairs. Three hundred journalists were jailed after the first Newspaper Ordinance came into force in 1875 (Lee 1985). But, for the next half century, press control was exercised mainly through bureaucratic surveillance and warnings, rather than prosecutions and closures. After 1937, many newspapers were forced to amalgamate and, as the New Order state embraced total war, writers were blacklisted and 'communist' journalists were jailed and even tortured and killed. Totalitarian Japan did not have a 'party newspaper', nor did it completely eliminate criticism, but it found highly effective means of harnessing an existing commercial press to state policy (Shillony 1981).

At the end of the war, Japan's commercial press remained intact. Indeed, some of its wartime features persist even today. For example, the present *Sankei* and *Nihon Keizai* newspapers are the result of the fusion of all trade newspapers, by decree in 1941, into one daily each for Osaka and Tokyo (Kasza 1988). The New Order curbs on newspaper ownership and profits, which have left the country's biggest newspapers still controlled by their own staffs, was a more significant legacy.

Yomiuri

The extraordinary career of Matsutaro Shoriki (1885–1969) illustrates the strange continuities of Japan's turbulent century. Shoriki came to prominence as chief of police intelligence, responsible for crushing the Rice Riots of 1918 and arresting Japan's first communist leaders. He quit the police in disgrace in 1923 after an assassination attempt on the prince regent Hirohito. But a year later, using right-wing political connections, he took over the ailing *Yomiuri Shimbun*. With a mix of innovation and populism he turned the business around and, with the success of the *Yomiuri* Giants baseball team, formed in 1934, the paper was set on a path to becoming the world's biggest-selling daily. But the *Yomiuri* was also an ardent supporter of Japan's war aims and Shoriki took a leading role in the 'state party' Imperial Rule Assistance Association. Purged by the Occupation powers in 1945, he was forced to sell out of his paper and was imprisoned as a Class 'A' war criminal. Yet, by the end of the Occupation, this staunch anti-communist former police chief was again back running the *Yomiuri*. In 1952 he founded Japan's first commercial television station (NTV), ran for parliament and returned to the front-rank of public influence serving in two post-War ministries.

But, after 1945, the environment in which the Japanese press operated changed dramatically. Restrictive laws were repealed and a new constitution for the first time guaranteed 'freedom of speech, press and all other forms of expression' (Kodansha 1993). In recognition of their special role in society, newspapers were granted certain privileges, including concessional mail rates and exemption from local 'enterprise tax', a privilege, shared with broadcasting and publishing companies, that was abolished in 1998. Newspaper companies, even though incorporated under the Commercial Code, are allowed to withhold their shares from the open market. And an exemption from the Anti-Monopoly Law gives newspapers control over their retail price to prevent discount competition and keep a paper's price the same wherever it is sold.

No government body oversees the newspaper industry in Japan. No operating licence is required. Self-regulation is exercised through the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association (*Nihon Shinbun Kyokai*). The Association's member-companies must observe a Canon of Journalism whose principles are 'accuracy', 'reporting free of opinion', 'vigilance against propaganda', 'restraint in criticism of individuals' and 'editorial truthfulness'. The Canon, adopted in 1946, is actually a reassertion of the old commercially-proven dictum of 'impartiality'. The higher valuation it places on 'fact', over 'opinion', casts the mainstream press more in the role of 'teacher' or 'watchdog', than of 'advocate'.

None of the major newspapers has a declared party allegiance or ideology. At election time, they endorse no side. Profiles of their readerships reveal a great similarity in terms of age group, gender and socioeconomic background (Lee 1985). Each strives to be a mass newspaper, appealing to all interests. That is not to say the political 'colouring' of the press is all of one hue. The *Asahi* and the *Mainichi* sit left of centre, a position consistently expressed through their opposition to reform of Japan's war-renouncing constitution. The *Yomiuri* tends to occupy the middle ground, although, since the 1970s, it has grown closer to the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. The world's biggest-selling financial paper, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (or *Nikkei*, as it's familiarly known) keeps in step with its mainly conservative readership, while the *Sankei Shimbun* sits well to the right on the political spectrum. In recent years, there has been a greater polarisation between *Asahi/Mainichi* and *Yomiuri/Sankei*

as papers have felt a need to distinguish themselves from their competitors in a tough business environment.

A tension between conformity and competition characterises the Japanese press. It is best observed in the press club, or *kisha kurabu*, system. Essentially a *kisha* club is a room attached to a government ministry or commercial organisation where reporters from the big media outlets spend their day attending briefings, processing news releases and cultivating official contacts. The 'pack' not only works but also socialises together. There are estimated to be 400–500 press clubs and the information generated within this closed system significantly influences the content of the news available to the public. Of Japan's 25,000 newspaper journalists half are assigned to press clubs (Hall 1998). Broadcast journalists, too, are represented.

Kisha clubs emerged early in the 20th century as a form of craft guild which journalists used to gain right of access to cover the Diet (Parliament), as well as to protect their own jobs. But, soon governments found them a convenient way to regulate the flow of public information, effectively corralling journalists in a pleasant professional environment which discourages independent research (Yamamoto 1989). The mere fact that 'pack' journalists spend the entire day looking over their shoulders at their competitors ensures that any one reporter trying to work alone will be both noticed and pursued. Defenders of the system say it produces news reporting that is better informed and more accurate and, that by ensuring equal treatment for all club members, prevents official Japan from playing favourites (Aida 1999). Critics say the *kisha* clubs turn newspapers into government gazettes (Shimoyama 1999).

One of the most familiar television images of 'government-in-operation' in Japan is of the Prime Minister standing on the steps of his Official Residence surrounded by journalists, three and four deep, furiously transcribing his every word. The *Nagata kurabu*, named for the Nagata-cho district of Tokyo where the Official Residence is located, has some 370 members representing 70 news media outlets. A core group of *ban kisha*, or beat reporters, are permanently assigned to the Prime Minister, noting all his meetings and following him wherever he goes. As a result, political reporting is smothered in 'diary' details but often lacks clear explanations of events. Context and background disappear behind the

'foreground' of daily comings and goings. Knowing their every word will be reported, politicians are expert at exploiting the native imprecision of the Japanese language to conceal their real views (Feldman 1996).

Keenly aware of the wide gap between the *tatemae* (principle) of the public news conference and the *honne* (reality) of the private thought, beat reporters accept that most of their best stories will come from unattributable consultations (*kondan*) with politicians and bureaucrats. These prearranged get-togethers are augmented by other, less formal contacts. Beat reporters engage in so-called *yo uchi* ('night attacks') and *asa gake* ('morning calls') on a politician's home, expecting to be invited in for a chat, often over snacks and drinks served by his wife; the reporters afterwards checking their interpretations with each other before phoning the office. Sources are protected behind vague phrases like 'persons concerned say' or 'conditions are tending more towards'. In keeping with this journalism of inspired hints and shared information, bylines have traditionally been rare.

Some estimate that 80 per cent of the information picked up through *kisha* clubs is off-the-record and not meant for publication (Feldman 1993). The system keeps members in line and a direct breach of confidentiality is easily traced. When Kakuei Tanaka became Prime Minister, he reportedly told a dinner group of reporters: 'If you don't cross a dangerous bridge, I will be safe. So will you. If I think a particular reporter is dangerous I can easily have him removed' (Kim 1981). In turn, Japanese politicians rely to a considerable extent on what they learn from friendly reporters. For bureaucrats, too, constantly engaged in turf-wars, the newspapers are often the best place to find out what's going on within a rival department. The climate of public opinion is especially important in a country where few people belong to a political party (Lee 1985). Most 'leaks' to the press, therefore, are purposeful: one ministry trying to outmanoeuvre another; politicians pressuring bureaucrats and vice versa; everyone testing the breeze.

The closer the intimacy between a reporter and his source the greater the dependency, of course. The story is told of one reporter covering the Secretary-General of the LDP who spent so long in his company he started to walk like him (Feldman 1993). Though journalists in Japan do exert a professional autonomy and, like journalists in other societies, exercise a degree of scepticism in their dealings with authority, perhaps the greatest

weakness of the *kisha* club system is that it does not encourage reporters to seek alternative sources of information.

But the system is not as 'watertight' as it is sometimes made out to be. The threat that Prime Minister Tanaka made to his beat reporters *did*, for instance, become public. Indeed, a good deal of the '80 per cent' of information which *kisha* club reporters cannot publish themselves sees the light of day in other ways. Reporters sometimes pass on sensitive information to the Opposition parties who can take up the fight in the Diet. Often *kisha* club members are the source for articles in Japan's many weekly and monthly current affairs magazines. The magazines (though several are affiliated with big newspapers) cannot join *kisha* clubs because they do not belong to the Nihon Shinbun Kyokai. By staying outside the Association, the magazines are free to indulge in a more speculative journalism: in some cases highly respectable, in others thoroughly scandalous. They often break the stories the newspapers dare not print.

In 1974, the *Bungei Shunju*, a leading monthly, published an exposé on the 'money politics' of Kakuei Tanaka. The 'insiders' of the *Nagata kurabu* at first ignored the 'outsider' magazine. It wasn't until Tanaka was challenged over the *Bungei Shunju* articles, during an appearance at the Foreign Correspondents' Club, that the mainstream Japanese media were galvanised into action. Within two months Tanaka had resigned. Several Prime Ministers since have been forced from office as a result of scandals or loss of public trust following media disclosures. The newspapers have not always led the way but their influence in building a public consensus, once information filters out, can be decisive.

The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan (FCCJ), formed in Tokyo soon after the war, though less exclusive than the *kisha* clubs, is as much a professional association as a social gathering place. The Foreign Press in Japan is the FCCJ's own lobby group. There are more than 700 accredited foreign correspondents who are issued a special identity card to assist with their newsgathering. It is possible to work without official status but for visa purposes alone accreditation is usually necessary. Accredited and visiting foreign journalists can make use of a well resourced Foreign Press Centre that is funded privately but has close government links.

The scandal-ridden 1970s and 1980s eventually led to the collapse of the old conservative ascendancy of the Liberal Democratic Party, and in 1993 a coalition government led by Morihiro Hosokawa took office. After

decades of drift, Hosokawa initially brought a new sense of urgency to decision-making. His hallmark was the 'midnight' news conference, carried 'live' on television, which fed rising expectations of a more transparent and accountable style of politics.

The newspaper-dominated *kisha* clubs were disoriented by these changes. Clubs attached to each of the LDP's many factions lost importance when the factions themselves withered. *Ban* reporters had rarely bothered to make 'night attacks' on the homes of Opposition politicians; indeed, quite a few journalists regarded the press as Japan's real Opposition and held the minority parties in disdain. Now they were in government, this neglect produced a huge information gap. The sole *kisha* club for the entire Opposition had, by tradition, been located at the Socialist Party headquarters. Suddenly, space was in such demand there was pandemonium. When one of the new power-brokers, the former-LDP's Ichiro Ozawa, argued with his press corps he seized the chance to make some further renovations—and banned behind-the-scenes contacts with journalists, their precious *kondan*.

Television influence switches on

The power shift at Nagata-cho had parallels in the media, where broadcast journalists for the first time began to exert as much, if not more influence than their newspaper colleagues. The final acts that broke the LDP's 38-year hold on power demonstrated the new influence of television news anchors. On TV Asahi, 20 million viewers tuned in nightly to watch Hiroshi Kume lampoon LDP corruption (Altman 1996). The criminal links of party boss Shin Kanemaru were forensically laid bare. Kume looked the viewer in the eye and asked: 'Hard to believe they run the country this way, isn't it?' (Sherman 1995). Then came a fateful interview which Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa gave on rival network, TBS. Agreeing to forgo the customary requirement only to accept questions on notice, Miyazawa was led into giving an unqualified commitment to electoral law reform. The interview pledge was held against him when he failed to deliver, forcing him to resign.

By 1993, a survey found more people were influenced by political reporting on television, than in the press (Altman 1996). The newspapers' old formula of anonymous news stories set alongside rather pedagogic

A *n agent for change*

Japanese have a strong sense of resignation. '*Shikata ga nai*' ('It can't be avoided') is a common expression. Some regard this mindset as 'masochistic' and link it to political passivity (Minami, 1998). 'The Japanese public', says one writer, 'maintain what is probably the world's highest threshold of indignation' (Gibney, 1996). If so, the rise of the influential newscaster Hiroshi Kume (1944–) represents a boiling over of that indignation in the form of a new media assertiveness. Kume is not a trained journalist. His first 20 years in broadcasting were spent hosting singing and cooking shows. A freelancer, with his own production company, he was an unlikely choice to front the current affairs program, *News Station*, which TV Asahi launched in 1985. Kume injected humour, movement, stage props and, most tellingly, his personal opinions into the daily news. 'Reporting things impartially', he declared, 'is just impossible' (Sherman 1995). *News Station*, fashionably long and late (in the 22:00–23:20 timeslot) became the nation's most-watched news show. Taking on corrupt politicians, Kume's rapid-fire, straight-talking style broke the mould of media 'impartiality'. Fourteen years on, his stocks aren't as high as they were. *News Station* still rates a respectable 15 (the best of any commercial TV news), but Kume's energy seems diminished. Recently, a false pollution scare, leading to an on-air apology, dented his image. Japan's political story has also lost its sting. On reflection, it may be that, even at the peak of his success, Kume was more a product of the times than a free agent of change.

opinion pieces by professional 'commentators' paled in comparison with the networks' heady mix of serious and light-hearted, factual and opinionated treatment of national affairs. Political 'amateurs'—often *talento* from the entertainment world—joined panel discussions of current events, bringing issues closer to the people (Kodansha 1993). Former newspaper journalists, their images transformed by television exposure, became opinion-leaders. Politicians were flushed out of their 'smoke-filled rooms' and put before the cameras in 'live' debates. What some have described as the 'trickster' role of the media in Japan—having allegiance to none, but playing the jester or fool to the Establishment—found its sharpest expression through television (Pharr 1996).

Broadcast news as an investigative and opinion-forming influence has come a long way, though this should not be overstated. Until 1947,

broadcasting was a government monopoly. During the war, radio was harnessed for propaganda purposes much more directly than newspapers (Kasza 1988). Japanese first heard of the attack on Pearl Harbor through radio, and were told of Japan's surrender the same way. The Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) continues to hold a special status as a voice of authority. The non-profit public broadcaster raises a budget of 635 billion yen (A\$ 8.5 billion), 98 per cent of it through license fees. (It does not carry advertising.) It has 13,000 full-time employees maintaining three radio networks; two terrestrial and two satellite (DBS) domestic television networks; Radio Japan's international service; and satellite television broadcasts beamed to audiences in Europe, North America and Asia (NHK 1999).

The Prime Minister with the approval of the Diet appoints NHK's Board of Governors. On a day-to-day basis it aspires to be free of political influence. NHK broadcasts Diet sessions and all formal news conferences by the Prime Minister. At election time, it carries the publicly funded personal 'introductions' of every candidate. News and current affairs occupy the biggest share of content on both its terrestrial TV (40 per cent) and AM radio (48 per cent) networks (Omori 1997), and NHK currently leads the television news ratings (Video Research 1999). The Corporation's approach to news is cautious, factual and unfailingly serious: devoting much attention to government decisions, proposals and ceremonies (Krauss 1996). Some foreign journalists who have worked for NHK have expressed discomfort with its 'sins of omission' and tendency to 'pull its punches' on anything controversial (Sherman 1994). As one astute observer has written: 'For the average citizen who watches NHK, the state appears not only the most frequent and important definer of events in Japan but also as conflict manager in almost all aspects of social and economic life' (Feldman 1997).

There are five commercial broadcasting networks, all affiliated with major newspapers. Nippon Television (NTV) and Fuji Television, the ratings leaders, each has sales of around 300 billion yen (A\$4 billion). The 'big five' generate 80 per cent of the programming seen on the 125 member-stations of the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters (not including the Association's six satellite station members) (Omori 1997). Unlike the newspaper industry, broadcasters are subject to direct

Newspaper and TV station links

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>TV station</i>	<i>No. of affiliate stations</i>
<i>Asahi</i>	TV Asahi	23
<i>Yomiuri</i>	NTV	24
<i>Sankei</i>	Fuji Television	27
<i>Mainichi</i>	TBS	27
<i>Nikkei</i>	TV Tokyo	5

Source: *Facts and Figures*, 1999.

government supervision by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications; a broadcasting licence is required. (A commission set-up during the Occupation as a buffer between the industry and government was abolished soon after the Americans left.) The Broadcast Law allows stations freedom from specific interference as long as they keep within the law (Luther and Boyd 1997). It does not prescribe content in detail, but says programming must conform to 'good morals and manners', 'not disturb public security', be 'truthful' and maintain 'political impartiality' (Kodansha 1993).

The stations' historical dependence on a supply of news from their associated newspapers retarded the development of a strong, separate identity for broadcast journalism in Japan. It's no coincidence that after TBS pared back its financial links with *Mainichi Shimbun* in the 1970s the network's own news division grew in stature. Apart from NHK, though, Japan's broadcasting companies employ far fewer journalists than the big US networks.

Ownership issues

The pattern of ownership and influence within the Japanese media is complex and, in some respects, highly unusual. Related business interests, like Dentsu, are conspicuous on the share registries, as would be expected. The banks, trading houses, electronics firms, and industrial giants like Nippon Steel are there too. But across both newspapers and broadcasting no single player has anything approaching ownership dominance in any

single market. Even the Fujisankei Communications Group, Japan's most powerful commercial media conglomerate, with 100 companies and 12,000 employees, is a minnow compared with News Corporation.

For broadcasters, a ministry ordinance limits the number of stations a person can own or control. Licensing criteria in principle prohibit control of three media enterprises, that is, newspaper, radio and television. If a newspaper also owns radio and television interests in the same market, 'control' has been interpreted to limit involvement to 10 per cent of voting shares and 20 per cent of directors in common (Omori 1997). This does not prevent affiliated companies taking up shares, nor prevent larger cross-shareholdings in the case of just two media enterprises; for example, a newspaper and a television station. In the latter case, the shareholding must remain below 50 per cent.

Neither newspapers nor broadcasters are restricted from pursuing other avenues of investment, and earnings from real estate, fun parks, museums, books and movies, among other things, provide a significant portion of revenues. Competitors also join forces, from time to time, as they did when Japan's first commercial satellite broadcasting company (WOWOW) was formed (Nakada 1999). In recent years, regulations to restrict concentration of ownership have been relaxed in the broadcasting industry to allow for the development of new types of media (Otsuka 1996). In the interlinked world of Japanese business, entities divide and merge somewhat mysteriously.

Look into the ownership record of the *Asahi Shimbun* and the names Murayama and Ueno appear right back to the paper's creation last century. But, unlike media dynasties in other countries, the *Asahi's* founding families have long since become owners without editorial influence. The remainder of the paper's shares are held by staff until they leave the company, when they must be 'sold' into a trust. The same is true at the *Yomiuri*. The *Nikkei* is also 'staff-owned'; the *Mainichi's* staff-ownership was greatly reduced after it had to be bailed out by the banks; and the *Sankei* is mainly owned by Fujisankei group companies.

Newspapers are protected from hostile takeovers by these tight holdings. The downside is that they cannot raise capital on the stock market and are heavily dependent on bank finance. Massive investments in labour-saving technology over the past two decades have made this indebtedness even greater. Some regard it as unhealthy, and believe it's

influenced reporting on corporate Japan (Wolferen 1989). While newspapers may pick up on episodes of pollution, bid-rigging or unsafe products, the argument goes, there's been little questioning of the economic system itself.

Legal freedoms, cultural controls

Like ownership, the issues of press freedom and journalistic independence cannot be separated from the forces of history and culture. Within weeks of Japan's surrender in August 1945, newspaper staff were clamouring for democratic reform. First at the *Yomiuri*, then at other papers, they demanded that management quit to take responsibility for backing the militarists. For a time, the workers had control of the presses, until General MacArthur took fright, sent in police to break up union sit-ins, and ensured that the newspaper owners' prerogative over 'editorial rights' was reasserted (Lee 1985).

Most staff today are organised in company unions. The print media's umbrella labour organisation is the Federation of Newspaper Workers' Unions, which has lost influence as automation has thinned the ranks of printers. The Japan Congress of Journalists (an association of some 1,500 'progressive' journalists) is a member of the International Organisation of Journalists. Labour, on occasions, will still confront management over editorial issues. At the *Mainichi*, for instance, staff rebelled over the paper's support for the US–Japan Security Treaty in 1969, and again in 1975 when an article critical of the Emperor was suppressed (Lee 1985). On neither occasion did the paper change its policy.

The journalism profession retains considerable respect in Japan—despite recent controversies. Competition for a job with a major newspaper or broadcaster is severe and a university degree is essential. But traditions die hard. Among new recruits, degrees in Law or the Humanities greatly outnumber those in Communications or Media; 90 per cent of journalists are men (Haruhara and Amenomori 1997); and newspapers demand allegiance to company before profession, and will not hesitate to reassign a reporter who does not make the grade to a job in advertising or sales. Like other Japanese industrial enterprises, media firms are hierarchical and insiders speak of a factory-like 'production line' of news that can stifle originality and dissent (Emmott 1989). On the other hand, freedom

from the influence of proprietors and a 'bottom up' newsgathering method (entrusting young reporters to identify and shape their own stories) are both consistent with an active free press (Kim 1981).

Outside controls on the media are comparatively light. One study has rated Japan among the twelve countries with the lowest tendency to control the press (Feldman 1993). An action for libel against a published report will not succeed if what it says is true. On a matter of public interest, if a journalist makes a mistake in good faith, Japanese courts are unlikely to convict for libel. Privilege attaches to reporting of official announcements, Diet proceedings and court evidence. Public figures (with the exception of the Imperial Family) have learnt to expect only a limited right to privacy.

However, the constitutional 'freedom of reporting' is not the same as 'freedom of news gathering'. Restrictions apply, for example, to the recording or filming of court proceedings. There is no explicit protection for news sources (Kim 1981). Courts have been found to have the power to demand television footage and other material as evidence. State 'secrets' are protected by a law that targets the public servant who provides restricted information, rather than the reporter who obtains it. In a famous case, a court imposed a suspended jail sentence on a female secretary in the Foreign Ministry for 'leaking' information, while acquitting the journalist who'd seduced her to obtain it. (The Supreme Court later punished the journalist for using 'inducements'.)

One area where, by law and convention, unusual restrictions do apply is in the coverage of elections. The pursuit of 'impartiality' is taken to mean that a news story identifying a particular candidate should give equal exposure to all his or her opponents. Especially on television, it makes in-depth coverage so unwieldy that often no candidate is identified, but is instead represented by a shot taken from behind or by a white-gloved hand clutching a microphone. Candidates cannot buy time on TV or space in newspapers, although since the law was changed, political parties can. The Election Law prohibits the publication of 'popularity polls'. Media companies have long been allowed to argue that surveys of voting intentions are not 'popularity polls', a tolerance that is currently being challenged. In the final analysis, the national newspapers are considered to have little impact on results in specific electorates because

of the overwhelming influence of parochial issues and local supporter groups in Japanese politics (Lee 1985).

Informal pressures and cultural habits can distort reporting and hinder public access to information. Japan's complex relationship with China has led news organisations into special pleading and self-censorship. In the 1960s, the major newspapers did a secret deal with the Chinese government to abjure from 'hostile' reporting as the price for keeping correspondents in Beijing (Thayer 1975). While it hasn't always worked (the *Sankei* was only recently allowed to reopen its bureau after 31 years), frequently Japanese reporting of China turns a blind eye to human rights abuses. Other subjects handled 'delicately' in the media include the *burakumin* (descendants of feudal Japan's lowest caste, still the subject of discrimination), the *yakuza* criminal gangs and religious groups (notably the powerful Soka Gakkai lay-Buddhist sect). On occasions, the Imperial Household Agency has gained a news 'blackout' on sensitive topics. For more than a year, the mainstream media ignored the public interest in the Crown Prince's search for a bride, until the *Washington Post* revealed his choice in 1993. The couple's failure to produce an heir is a continuing object of media 'restraint'.

Lèse majesté used to be a crime punishable by death. These days Japan's right-wing extremists will sometimes take it upon themselves to apply the ultimate sanction. Cruising Tokyo's government district in their loudspeaker vans, the rightists are a constant reminder of the dangers of upholding liberal democracy, not only to the nation's bureaucrats and politicians, but also to the many journalists who work among them. In 1987, in the midst of a right-wing crusade against the *Asahi Shimbun*, two young staff were killed when their branch office was sprayed with shotgun blasts. Threats against the so-called 'leftist' press, usually over matters of security policy or concerning the Imperial Family, are not uncommon.

In 1999 the Diet finally passed a Freedom of Information (FOI) bill—17 years after the first of many local government ordinances was enacted as a result of pressure from citizens' groups. The bill, which goes into effect in 2001, stipulates that the government must be accountable, although it does not formally enshrine a 'right to know'. The final push for a national FOI law came after disclosures about the Health and Welfare Ministry's involvement in the deaths of haemophiliac patients through

the secret use of HIV-contaminated blood. However, just as in the campaign for the FOI bill, this scandal broke not because of stories in the press, but because the victims and their supporters demanded (and finally got) bureaucratic accountability.

Looking ahead

A sea change is occurring in the Japanese news media. Technological innovation, commercial deregulation, foreign pressure for market-opening, calls for tighter editorial controls, and community unrest over media abuses are bringing some fundamental assumptions into question. The weakened economy is itself a factor, both in business terms and for what it has again revealed about the professional shortcomings of the Japanese news media. Journalists and commentators were slow to recognise the severity of the recession Japan entered in the 1990s, and have struggled to offer any clear picture of what needs to be fixed. Reporters in the Bank of Japan *kisha* club even helped conceal the full extent of the banks' bad debts (though some fed tips to *The Economist* magazine which kept well ahead of most of Japan's own publications), and editors at the venerable *Nikkei* were persuaded to the official view that corporate collapses could be avoided by withholding information (Landers 1999). All of this 'restraint' and dependence on overly optimistic official forecasts, of course, only made the problems worse.

The *kisha* club system is under sustained attack. Foreign correspondents, once barred from the clubs, have lately broken down the doors to a dozen or more key ministries and economic organs. Meanwhile, some local citizens' groups have been agitating to close the *kisha* clubs in their city halls, and for the return of public money spent entertaining reporters. There's unease, too, about the presence of journalists from elite media organisations (especially NHK and the *Nikkei*) as members of no less than half of all government advisory bodies (*shingikai*). These advisory bodies play a crucial role in policy formation—and critics contend that journalists should not allow their independence to be compromised (Harari 1997).

The reputation of television news suffered a heavy blow in 1996. In the uproar over the Aum Shinrikyo case, it was revealed that, seven years earlier, the TBS network had bowed to pressure not to air an interview in

which serious allegations were first raised against the sect. Worse still, a TBS producer had secretly shown Aum leaders the taped interview with a human rights lawyer. The lawyer, his wife and infant son disappeared soon after—kidnapped and murdered by the Aum, as it turned out. The episode sparked calls for greater outside controls over broadcasters, if stations themselves could not uphold ethical standards (Goto 1997).

The Liberal Democratic Party, under fire from Kume's *News Station*, had pressured companies, including Toyota, to withdraw advertising. When comments by an executive of TV Asahi, that the station had set out to 'crush' the LDP, were made public, he lost his job and was hauled before the Diet and forced to apologise, just days before the station's license was up for review (Altman 1996). It was a sharp reminder of the broadcasting industry's statutory obligation to be politically 'impartial' (even though, in the view of this executive, his station had been 'under the thumb' of the LDP for years).

Back in power again, the LDP is looking at setting up an around-the-clock monitoring system to respond to alleged 'bias' in television reporting (Landers 1999). Advocates of greater media control often argue their case—whether ingenuously or not—on the grounds of 'human rights'. The notorious habit of certain Japanese media to 'convict' criminal suspects, sometimes before they're even charged, leaves them wide open to attack. When a weekly magazine recently published the photograph of a minor who was charged with murder, some shops unilaterally withdrew the publication from sale because of the public outcry: an appeal to 'human rights' was now being used to justify censorship (Foreign Press Center 1997).

The newspaper industry is worried. It depends for more than half its income on subscriptions, underpinned by a price cartel (Sato 1999). This arrangement, it argues, is essential for maintaining a public-interest ethic unsullied by the newspaper 'bingo'-type price wars seen in other countries (Kono 1999). But deregulation is the order of the day. A new code has opened the way for a measure of discounting; and the threat of more radical deregulation of the newspaper industry remains a powerful weapon in the hands of the government.

Newspaper profits have tumbled in recent years. Some are running at a loss (Ono 1999). The arrival of new entrants only adds to the pressure. Rupert Murdoch stunned Japanese business in 1996 when he and a local

partner, Masayoshi Son, grabbed 21.4 per cent of TV Asahi (foreigners are limited to holding 20 per cent of a broadcasting company in their own right), after Murdoch had declared his intention to tap 'one of the world's last media gold mines' through a new digital satellite service, JSkyB. The industry closed ranks. Two years later Murdoch had exited TV Asahi, merged JSkyB with an existing satellite company, PerfecTV!, and sold down his investment (to 11.4 per cent) by inviting Fuji Television, Sony Corporation and several other Japanese 'heavyweights' into the deal. Sky PerfecTV! and its digital competitor, DirecTV (substantially owned by Hughes Electronics), represent the first significant foreign incursions into Japan's media marketplace.

Thirty years ago, 60 per cent of Japanese men in their twenties read newspapers. Today the proportion is half that (NHK Institute 1999). The proliferation of alternative sources of information, including direct access through the Internet, is displacing journalists working for conventional mass media from the centre-stage of opinion leadership. Digital multi-channelling, which grants flexibility as to when and in what form the user can consume information, dilutes the importance of newspaper 'scoops' or fixed-schedule news bulletins.

Some responses are already evident. The content of Japanese newspapers grows increasingly diverse; journalists' bylines are appearing

Softbank

Masayoshi Son (1958 –) is a Japanese-born ethnic Korean who spent his formative years in the United States. After returning to Japan in 1980, he founded Softbank, a company that's ridden the Internet and computer software booms and carried him from obscurity to financial stardom. Son is Rupert Murdoch's partner in the digital satellite provider, SKY PerfecTV!, and a prime example of the 'new money' that's begun to challenge Japan's media Establishment. His strategic partners are not the familiar city banks and manufacturing firms, but a mobile telephone company, the owner of McDonalds Japan and a financial services group. Satellite TV is forecast to grow to a third the size of the terrestrial market—hundreds of new channels to draw upon the public's reading and viewing time. Softbank more than trebled its profits to 37.5 billion yen (A\$536 million) in the year to March 1999, at a time when newspaper profits were in sharp retreat.

more often; readers are given space to tell their own stories; and the many Internet editions of papers allow for instant feedback on topics. The tone once adopted by papers of a teacher addressing pupils has become more like a discussion among friends. At the same time, some newspapers are trying to sharpen their identities by taking on a greater 'advocacy' role. For example, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* has produced its own detailed proposals for a new Constitution—once almost a taboo subject. Companies are also renovating their image through technology: introducing more use of colour and opening printing plants overseas to reach expatriates. Once the challenge was to sell the newspapers that were produced, now it's to produce newspapers that will sell.

In radio, new licenses have spawned many low-powered FM stations, which identify closely with their local audience. In television, the pursuit of ratings has given rise to more opinionated journalism, as well as blurring the line between entertainment and news. The industry is having to fight off those who would turn back the clock to greater outside editorial control.

Nevertheless, history suggests that the quality of press freedom in Japan ultimately will not be determined by overt regulation, or diversity of ownership, or technological innovation. It will rest, instead, with the preparedness of individual journalists and editors to resist their own cultural habits of deferring to authority and falling in line with shared opinion; dangerously comforted by the warmth of the herd.

Media websites

Asahi Shimbun, www.asahi.com/

Yomiuri Shimbun, www.yomiuri.com.jp/

Nihon Keizai Shimbun, www.nikkei.com.jp/

Mainichi Shimbun, www.mainichi.com.jp/

Sankei Shimbun, www.sankei.com.jp/ *

The Japan Times, www.japantimes.co.jp/

Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association, www.pressnet.or.jp

NHK, www.nhk.or.jp/

National Association of Commercial Broadcasters, www.nab.or.jp/

Fuji Television, www.fujitv.co.jp/

TBS, www.tbs.co.jp/

NTV, www.ntv.co.jp/

Losing control

TV Asahi, www.tv-asahi.co.jp/ *

TV Tokyo, www.tv-tokyo.co.jp/ *

Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan, www.ns2.fcccj.or.jp/

Foreign Press Center, www.nttl.co.jp/fpc/

Japan Congress of Journalists, www.tky.3web.ne.jp/

* Japanese only