

The news media in Japan: A discussion of E.G. Seidensticker's comment that the mainstream Japanese press are "Free, unfettered, but timid".

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Introduction.

The role of the media in any contemporary industrial, or post-industrial, society is important to consider because it plays such a huge part in most people's lives. People living in such countries now have access to more newspapers and magazines, television and radio stations, satellite and cable media and, of course, the enormous variety of sources available on the internet than ever before. These days the word 'saturation' collocates comfortably with 'media' and 'coverage' and, as Pharr (1996, p.4) notes, "If media saturation is well advanced in most industrial societies, Japan is no exception." Pharr also points out that the media in Japan generally enjoys great prestige and credibility. Research shows that Japanese people spend several hours a day reading, watching and listening to various forms of media, so it is important to assess what the media is like.

In this paper I will discuss the comment made by the respected Japanese scholar Edwin Seidensticker that the mainstream media in Japan is "Free, unfettered, but timid." (1984). Before considering in detail the appropriateness of Seidensticker's comment on the media in contemporary Japan, we need to examine some of the words in the first sentence of the question, namely "mainstream", and the words in his quotation. As Farley (1996) and others (for example, Hall, 1998; Morikawa, 1992) have discussed, Japan — more than many

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other countries — has a more significant divide between what might be called the ‘mainstream’ press and the non-mainstream press. Although I do not wish to make too much of this difference, it is certainly something to consider in relation to Seidensticker’s comment.

As for the three adjectives in the quotation (in fact, they were the headline of his article), it is clear that he considers the first two good things, whereas the third, “timid”, keeps its normal, pejorative, meaning. Indeed, Seidensticker says Japanese newspapers are “timid and backward compared with those of other democratic societies” (p. 21). “Free” and “unfettered” suggest Japan’s press has no laws or direct government pressure hampering its reporting ambitions, but that, nevertheless, it holds back because it is “timid”. Implied in that view is what he believes the press should be like: the “watchdog”, as described by Farley and Pharr. Farley states boldly,

Of the many functions filled by the press in a modern democracy like Japan, none is more essential than that of “watchdog”, ferreting out and exposing the wrongdoing and incompetence of those in authority. (p.133)

This is not the only way of viewing the role of the media, however, either as it is in practice or as it should be, according to Pharr’s analysis (1996, chapter one). If the media’s role is meant to be as a *spectator*, or *servant of the state* or even as Pharr’s “trickster”, the adjective “timid” does not seem an appropriate choice of word. That is unless he means publications are timid in relation to each other rather than in relation to the state. “Uniformity in coverage”, as Feldman (1993, p. 122) puts it, is also something I shall discuss.

One more point to consider is that Siedensticker made his comment in 1984. It may be that the media has changed enough since then for his view to need revising.

The “free, unfettered” nature of Japan’s media.

As Altman (1996) and Feldman both point out, there are no laws specifically restricting or regulating Japan’s press; in fact, article 21 of the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, including press reporting and comment. Furthermore, Feldman writes, “In a 1987 survey of 58 countries, Merrill found that Japan is among the 12 countries with the lowest tendency to control the press.” (p. 14). Broadcasters – as they also are in Britain – are constrained by a law stipulating political fairness. But this allows for fair comment and Kume Hiroshi gets away with more opinionated editorializing on TV Asahi’s *News Station*, for example, than do most presenters on news programmes on British television or radio.

There are, however, constraints on the media’s freedom, even if they are not explicit. One of them is the result of news-gathering through the infamous *kisha kurabu* (discussed at length by Pharr and Kraus, 1996, van Wolferan, 1989, Hall and Feldman, among others). Akhavan-Majid (1990) argues that these clubs are one of the “subtle restrictions on news-gathering which lead to functional dependence on the part of medial professionals on the friendship and favor of government officials.” (p.1011.) Another are the laws which “restrict the disclosure of various types of information by government employees” (p.1010). There are other constraints, too. Ito (1990) discusses the effect of *shimbun hihan* (criticism of newspapers), which has proved popular among the public, and of the prevailing national mood, or *kûki*. He writes,

...while the mass media contribute to the creation and maintenance of certain *kûki*, the mass media themselves are under the pressure of *kûki* created and maintained by government policies (which they report) and public attitudes (p.440).

He cites as an example the fact that it is much more taboo to criticize the imperial system now than it was between the end of the war and the mid-1960s. The media in other countries are also under pressure periodically from the equivalent of

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shimbun hihan and *kûki*. For example, the prevailing public mood, as well as government threats of legislation, led to British newspapers agreeing amongst themselves to be more restrained in pursuing celebrities following the death of Princess Diana in 1997. In Japan, there is also government influence on the press “through preferential treatment in business management” (Feldman, p.14) – which can also be withdrawn – and on the major broadcasting companies by the periodic review of their licences, as Altman points out. Some of these points are by no means unique to Japan, but they are worth bearing in mind even if we accept Siedensticker’s general view that the press is “free” and “unfettered”. As Altman writes, the print media has freedom to publish what it wants “[i]n theory”. (p.181).

The mainstream/non-mainstream media divide

Other modern democratic countries have a mainstream and non-mainstream press and, with the rapid expansion of the internet, the latter has a greater chance of developing, being noticed and riling those in the elite of the mainstream press. In the USA, for example, the Drudge Report, a news site run by Matt Drudge, has broken stories the mainstream press was too “timid” to report, until he had brought them into the public domain. The most famous example related to the affair between President Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. In Japan, however, there has long been a big divide between the two. One way it is marked is by the *kisha* (press) club system. The five national newspapers and their commercial broadcasting affiliates, along with the public broadcasting corporation NHK, who are entitled to have members of the ubiquitous *kisha* clubs are definitely mainstream. Lower in status but still “in the system are the four large region-wide ‘block’ dailies published at Sapporo, Nagoya, Hiroshima and Fukuoka, and Japan’s two wire services, *Kyôdô Tsûshin* and *Jiji Tsûshin*.” (Hall, p.49.) This system – giving certain organizations and their reporters exclusive and intimate access to the politicians at the heart of government, the

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bureaucratic elite and business leaders, as well as police – means the mainstream media can be “viewed as an ‘elite power group’ able to exercise reverse control on the ruling elite, even as it is controlled by it”, argues Akhavan-Majid (p.1006).

This collective power is augmented by the “highly concentrated nature of the mass media in Japan”. (p.1007.) The parent companies which own the five national daily newspapers also own the five commercial television networks, linked as shown in the table:

Newspaper	<i>Yomiuri</i>	<i>Asahi</i>	<i>Mainichi</i>	<i>Nihon Keizai</i>	<i>Sankei</i>
TV network	NTV	TV Asahi	TBS	TV Tokyo	Fuji

Society’s elite – mainstream media included – are involved in a symbiotic relationship. Journalists rely on those whose press clubs they belong to for information, but equally the “executives and managing editors of these conglomerates hold the power to cover up or reveal any political scandal or to campaign for or against any interest.” (p.1008). That “the educational and social backgrounds of journalists in large media firms resemble those of elites in other spheres” (Sugimoto, 1997, p.212) adds to the symbiotic nature of the relationship.

There are, however, many journalists and media outside this mainstream. Some are on the periphery of the mainstream. The big five newspapers all have weekly magazine affiliates, which do not always have friendly relationships with them. For example, in 1971, the *Asahi Journal*, a subsidiary weekly of the *Asahi Shimbun*, joined in the campaign of *shimbun hihan* by conservative critics at the time by carrying a picture which made fun of the leftist views of its mother newspaper.¹ But following another story in another *Asahi* weekly, which incurred the wrath of the legal establishment, “the *Asahi Shimbun* introduced the editor-in-chief system under which all contents of all publications of the company were to

¹ According to Ito, “the editors of this weekly magazine were punished as a result” (p.439)

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be supervised by the president of the company” (Hirose, 1990), thereby curbing much of the independence of the weeklies in that publishing group.

Nevertheless, it is here, in the non-mainstream press, particularly in the *shûkanshi*, the weeklies, that one can find some of the most dynamic journalism in Japan. Here, outside the symbiotic relationship with the other elites, reporters and editors are willing to tackle stories kept from the public by the mainstream press. One example was in November 1998, when two or three magazines, including the *Shûkan Bunshun*, raised the issue of then Prime Minister Hashimoto’s affair with a married Chinese woman who was alleged to be a spy. Britain’s *Sunday Times* – which did report the story – explained why the possible scandal would remain unreported in Japan’s mainstream press by quoting Oka Takashi, then director of the international bureau of the opposition New Frontier party: “There’s still a reluctance in Japan to talk about the lower half of a politician’s body. There’s a feeling that private matters are meant to be kept private.” (23 November, 1998.)

Another example was in 1996 when, in a series of articles, the *Shûkan Post* magazine alleged corruption in the world of sumo. Most of the information for its detailed accusations came from a retired sumo wrestler Onaruto, who had his claims even more fully published in a best-selling book. Despite his shocking claims and despite the fact that they had reached a large segment of the population, “no other publication has grappled seriously with Onaruto’s claims”, reported *The Economist* (22 June, 1996). That report continued,

the Weekly Post is so frustrated at the taboo on printing unfavourable news about the sumo association that is actively encouraging foreign reporters to cover the scandal. It then reprints the results in its own papers, as evidence that the JSA² is bringing the sport into disrepute overseas.

In fact, the *Shûkan Post* had a precedent for hoping that *gaiatsu*, or outside

² Japan Sumo Association.

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pressure, might lead to the mainstream press picking up the issue. The most spectacular example of such pressure was in 1974 when the then Prime Minister Tanaka Kazuei, perhaps Japan's most powerful since the war, was forced to resign in a corruption scandal. This momentous event came about as a result of a story first being investigated and reported by a freelance Japanese reporter (Tachibana Takashi) and his colleagues in a monthly magazine (*Bungei Shunjū*). It was picked up and given prominence by the foreign press — who also grilled the prime minister at a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan — and then finally unleashed by Japan's mainstream media. (See Farley, and Hall, for descriptions of this episode.)

The television equivalents of the weeklies and monthlies are the daytime *waido shō* (wide shows). Although they are broadcast on the major commercial networks, they are outside the mainstream news and current affairs programmes. They are presented in the popular, sensational, style. Their reporters are not members of any establishment *kisha kurabu*. There are clearly good and bad points to these wide shows and magazines. Morikawa writes, "Opponents charge, and they are right, that in the process of sleuthing, the popular media often succeeds at the expense of human rights and privacy." (1992, p. 212.) There are times, though, when the popular media seems to take on not only the 'watchdog' role that the mainstream media does not explicitly concern itself with, but also the job normally regarded as the purview of the police. Morikawa points out that both "the weeklies and the wide shows uncover fraud, investigate wrongdoing, and catch criminals." She cites several cases of "the media outperforming the police". (p.217.) One resulted in the arrest of Miura Kazuyoshi, who had allegedly arranged to have his wife killed for insurance money during a trip to Los Angeles.

It might seem from much of the discussion above that one could not say the non-mainstream press was "timid". Morikawa, however, also presents several cases in her analysis to show that the "language of the popular media is a language of illusion, euphemism, and exoticism", which, she says, "can be used

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to help create a national mood that can do the public a grave disservice.” (p.213.) She cites several examples over the years where the “disservice” has been to portray Japan – to the Japanese – as a much less problematic place than it really is. Such cases include the reporting of AIDS in the early ‘90s as “not a matter of concern to Japanese” (p.214), and the use of “light, vague language” (p.215), such as *ijime* and *itazura*, to mask serious anti-social behaviour against, especially, children and women. Even more dangerous, perhaps, is that the popular media has often been found presenting opinions and gossip as fact.

On a more positive note, what Morikawa calls “exoticisms” – the use of phrases imported from abroad – have sometimes been used by the popular media effectively as a way of raising consciousness about problems within Japan. *Seku hara*, for sexual harassment, is the best known example. This then led to the coining of *aru hara* to describe the alcohol harassment which is a problem perhaps more particular to Japan.

The ‘timidity’ of the mainstream media

What the media anywhere reveals to its readers or viewers and listeners is always less than the complete picture for various reasons, not least those “filters” which are described by Herman and Chomsky (1998). Bearing that in mind, let us consider how fair the word “timid” is as a description of the contemporary media in Japan. Since this word has a negative connotation, it may be instructive to consider some of the accusations various critics have made about the media.

Media analysis has a long tradition in Japan. According to Ito, the country had more books on journalism published even in the 19th century than any other in the non-western world. And the forerunners of the modern mass media – various popular publications and stage arts – disturbed the Tokugawa Shogunate enough for it to issue, in the late 17th century, “an order to ban some of them.” (Ito, p.425.) Consideration of the influential role played by the media in society, then, is not new. Academic criticism of the media (*shimbun hihan*),

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however, began in the early 1970s. Most of the criticism came from conservative and right wing commentators. They said Japanese newspapers were biased in favour of the left, which has been in permanent opposition since the 1950s. Krauss describes how critics and analysts – in the US as well as in Japan – looked back at the crisis surrounding the US-Japan Peace Treaty of 1960 to show how the press supported the opposition and encouraged demonstrations. In fact, he says, a closer examination of press coverage of that issue was “much more ambivalent.” (p.363.) Nevertheless, the criticism – sometimes even from non-mainstream stalemates (for example, the *Asahi* example discussed earlier) – along with the prevailing national mood encouraged much of the industry to adopt more clearly conservative views. The *Yomiuri* shifted right and overtook the *Asahi* in circulation. During this period, the *Asahi*, which has retained a more critical stance of conservative government policies, was the butt of most criticism from those taking a ‘realistic’, or right-wing, standpoint (Hirose, p.474).

The most common criticism nowadays from western and Japanese critics, whether they be academics or practising journalists, is that the mainstream media is too similar in its outlook and presentation. Westney (1996) and Feldman both argue that the main cause of the lack of diversity stems from the business environment. Although more competition is often regarded in the west as almost a guarantor of diversity, Westney argues that Japan has “comparatively high levels of competition in broadcasting” and “much higher levels of competition in the newspaper industry than does any Western country” (p.77). She says that newspapers – to maintain market share – have chosen a strategy in which “not alienating readers becomes more important than exciting them.” (p.78.) In this case, levelling the “timid” accusation seems appropriate.

Behind this strategy, though, is the structure of the ownership. Ironically, one of the laws which help to keep the media “free” leads to the lack of diversity. According to Feldman, Article 204-1 of the Commercial Code is one of the laws which “is intended to prevent any one person from obtaining a controlling

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interest” and protect “newspapers from being subjected to outside pressure.” (p. 15.) Because ownership is more diffuse, however, none of the media has a single, strong, clear-minded force behind it. Westney says that, “one of the barriers to the national press taking a strong stand on issues of the day is the difficulty of getting a consensus among the editorial staff on the appropriate approach.” (p.78.) This business strategy and structure, along with the *kisha kurabu* system, lead — according to Hall — to a “bland, noncontroversial conformity of reportage and interpretation” (p.48.) Hall makes a more serious charge, too: that “the notion of the public’s right to know — including that of the international public — has simply been ignored by the clubs, sources, and NSK³ alike.” (p.48.) No doubt life is easier for the ruling elites like this. Hall calls it a “cozy” situation. Sugimoto says the media “tends to be docile” (p.214).

It is not, however, always that easily controlled or obedient. One of the most outstanding news programmes on television in recent years has been TV Asahi’s *News Station*. Kume Hiroshi, who presents the programme, has proved himself to be much more trenchant in his editorial criticism and aggressive in his interviewing than the norm. He has been tough in his pursuit of the powerful, most notably in the 1992 scandal involving the transport company Sagawa and Kanemaru Shin, then the most powerful man behind the government. So many people watched *News Station*, neither the papers nor the political world in Nagatachô could ignore the story and Kanemaru eventually felt bound to resign from the Diet.

People or groups who are timid can often overcome this when they act together and Japan’s media has sometimes been criticized for its “pack journalism” (Feldman, p.122), for acting as one only once its ‘prey’ has been exposed and is on the run; in other words, as Hirose puts it, “for being tough with

³ *Nihon Shimbun Kyokai*, the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association.

⁴ This is often a danger with the mass media and a charge that could be levelled at Britain’s tabloid press (mainly) in its treatment of asylum seekers in the winter of 2000.

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weak individuals and weak towards the powerful.” (p.474.)⁴ For example, in the case of Kanemaru, it was only after his special treatment had been highlighted on *News Station*, giving voice to the indignation among the public, that the mainstream press joined in.

Even the mainstream newspaper press was vociferous in its criticism of the government’s crisis management in the days following the stroke which befell Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo in April 2000 and, especially, in the wake of the Hanshin earthquake in January 1995. Pekkanen (2000) argues that media coverage following the earthquake contributed strongly to the passing, in 1998, of the NPO law, which makes it easier for volunteer groups (nonprofit organizations) to gain legal status. He says the “unlikely allies” of the conservative *Nikkei Shimbun* and the liberal *Asahi Shimbun* were “the most aggressive in calling for a progressive NPO Law” (p.129) which at first met with resistance from politicians in the dominant Liberal Democratic Party and central bureaucracy. Pekkanen says,

...the media criticized the government not only for its inadequate response to the disaster, but also for failing to have the foresight to have supported volunteers in the years leading up to the earthquake. These calls easily blended into demands for support for a volunteer or NPO Law. Even the initial press coverage often included demands for legislative action. (p.116.)

Big business also felt the wrath of the media when it detected hubris in two companies in July 2000. First, media criticism helped persuade the Mori administration to drop plans to bale out the bankrupt department store Sogô. Then, the media — mainstream as well as *shûkanshi* and *waido shô* — heavily criticized the management of the *Yukijirushi* (Snow Brand) food manufacturer after revealing details of the recklessly unhygienic conditions at its Osaka plant which led to thousands of people suffering from food poisoning. The criticism — in print and on television, and openly at press conferences — led to the resignation of four senior executives, including the company’s president,

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Ishikawa Tetsuro. In an editorial the *Asahi Shimbun* said the company's response to the crisis was "outrageous"; the *Japan Times* accused the firm of "[g]ross negligence", "carelessness", "gambling with the public's health" and "arrogance". The *Mainichi Shimbun* also attacked the "nonchalance of government officials who had an overly high opinion of Snow Brand products", which "contributed to the spread of the food poisoning problem". As Pharr points out, "the media are unreliable as allies." (p.33.)

Conclusion

We have seen that there is a significant divide between the mainstream and non-mainstream press in Japan. About the mainstream media, except for some outstanding exceptions like *News Station*, the words "timid", "conformist" and "docile" can be persuasively be used. But not all the time; and, if the critics looked more closely, not perhaps so much more than the mainstream media in Seidensticker's own country.⁵ Pharr's metaphor of the media as "trickster" is an apt one for Japan because, as Krauss says, "the media may put new issues on the agenda or not, reinforce authority or undermine it, transmit information and images that support the state or its opponents" (p.365). We have seen that there have been several recent examples where the mainstream media has not been particularly docile or timid. Even in these cases, however, the mainstream media generally acts as one, attacking or not together, so that the criticism of uniformity, which is one kind of timidity, is much harder to refute. Overall

⁵ The Columbia Journalism Review recently devoted several pages to the problem of self-censorship (which is a way of being 'timid'). And one of the Oscar-nominated films of 2000, *The Insider*, revealed how supposedly hardened television journalists on one of the main network current affairs programmes (CBS's *60 Minutes*) readily agreed not to run a story on the advice of the company's legal counsel.

Also, compared with Europe, or Japan, the United States has a narrow political range which is reflected in its mainstream media's reporting. Except as a linguist, Naom Chomsky, for example, is ignored by the mainstream press because he is considered too left-wing even by the so-called 'liberal' press (see Hitchens, 1999.)

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though, the role of the media in Japan is often more complicated, and its behaviour more unpredictable, than acknowledged by many commentators.

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