Fish nor fowl: Kisha clubs and Japanese journalism

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If you think about it, most news is quite location-bound, too. While news can take place anywhere, recurring news, the largest category of all news types, mostly happens in predictable hot spots. In Japan, those hot spots for news are the 800-plus locations where kisha clubs just happen to be located and where the clubs exert enormous turf control. The issue is not whether there is or isn’t a kisha club, the issue is who controls the turf. That’s what makes membership so critical and the clubs so powerful.
Parody, in its comic relief, is often a welcome diversion, especially when the object of ridicule is not ourselves, not “our kind,” not like us.¹ Take, for example, a story in Japan Media Review about Sony Corporation’s dog-like robot ERS-7M3, which goes by the name Aibo (meaning companion or, perhaps, loveable ’bot). This US$2,000 electronic dog can read news headlines and even write its own blog. Combine those gifts with a 1,000 word vocabulary and you have the catchy title, “Sony’s Aibo Turns ‘Newshound’.”² The subtext is too delicious to pass up: essentially, your dog can read you the morning news as you sip your green tea and drink your miso soup. (In reality Japanese are more likely to have coffee and toast for breakfast, but never mind).

Or imagine the fun you can have with Japanese tabloids. And fun it is: Tabloid Tokyo—101 Tales of Sex, Crime and the Bizarre from Japan’s Wild Weeklies—by two non Japanese authors who search Japan’s rich load of weeklies for the quirky and flippant.³ They find an abundance to play with: from “A ‘Diplomat’ Who Bared Her Breasts to the North Koreans,” to “Men Who Dress in Lingerie under Their Business Suits,” to “Parents Who Dress Up their Children—Like Pets or Dolls.” This puts me in mind of a headline several years ago from the mother of U.S. tabloids, The National Enquirer: “Noted Psychic’s Head Explodes.” It’s all zany, good fun, and it gets old fast.

How refreshing, then, to encounter something that moves beyond parody or facile stereotype—or the usual carping that Japan seems to make itself ripe for. In this case, the subject is the Japanese media environment, which Jane O’Dwyer (see previous article) has done a very reasoned job of examining and comparing with media systems elsewhere. What is often overlooked in the rush to parody and criticize the Japanese media scene is context. That is to say, what about those newspapers Aibo will be reading to you?

As in most of the world, newspaper reading is down in Japan. According to a mid-2005 survey by the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association, newspaper reading declined about 2 percent from the level two years before.⁴ While the correlation is unclear, some of the decline may be due to the high penetration rate of ADSL subscriber lines and on-line news sources. But that said, take into account that almost 80 percent or more of all Japanese households read newspapers daily—an extremely high readership.

The survey results show an average of a little over 26 minutes of newspaper reading every morning. Men tend to read about four more minutes than women do—a little over 28 minutes to women’s 24 minutes. As is typical in most societies, older citizens read the most, and those in their twenties breeze by with a mere 18 minutes of morning newsreading. Nevertheless, this is a respectable showing. Aibo has its work cut out for it.

Japan is unusual in another sense. There are morning and evening editions of the same paper. News-reading in the evening accounts for diminished minutes; yet the figures for men and women are respectable: 17 minutes or so for men and almost 16 minutes for women. By any standard, this is a remarkable audience for a nation’s newspapers.

The 3,873 respondents from around the country were also asked where they got their news (multiple sources could be named). Fifty-eight percent pointed to newspapers,
almost 44.5 percent said NHK, the public service television network, and 43 percent said commercial TV. Around 17 percent said radio, demonstrating the medium’s continuing relative importance. Magazines were the least important as a news source—at a little over 13 percent.

For well over 25 percent of respondents, a significant, new source of news was the Internet. Interestingly, almost 42 percent of respondents also indicated that the Internet was the greatest source of “a variety of information,” but by that measure newspapers were not far behind—at almost 38 percent. (Again, respondents could name more than one source).

Few foreign observers would argue that Japan doesn’t have a rich media environment. It does. There are around 120 dailies, which, considering the diffusion rate, go to 554 persons per 1,000. That translates into around 72 million copies per day—a figure certainly exceeding anything like what you could find in the world’s number one economy. In media and in newspapers in particular, Japan, the world’s number two economy, doesn’t make such a bad showing at all.

So it isn’t the quantity or variety of media that elicits most foreign complaint. It is the quality of the media and club-based journalism. But in this matter too, a little context would be good. On September 15, 2005, readers of the Asahi Shimbun opened up their morning edition to a shocking revelation: A reporter in the paper’s Nagano bureau had faked his notes about the election that had taken place the previous August. The phony report, which made its way into the election news, included “information” about moves to form a new political party. The reporter’s motives were personal; he wanted to promote his career.

The Asahi Shimbun gave a full accounting, in excruciating detail, of this offense, including a record of discussions with the miscreant reporter. The deputy city news editor and three reporters who were appointed to investigate the paper’s misdeeds concluded: “Multiple errors piled up, but the publication of the false articles was primarily caused by a lack of communication between reporters and editors.”

The fallout extended beyond the paper. Shinichi Hakoshima, an executive adviser at the Asahi Shimbun, resigned as president of the powerful Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association and gave the following statement: “The newspaper industry faces issues on relations between news reporting and human rights, personal information protection, and the upcoming hike in the consumption tax. These matters require public receptiveness to the importance of newspapers. I feel deeply responsible for undermining the public trust that is the very foundation of newspapers.”

Contrast this incident at Asahi Shimbun with the scandals that have unfolded in recent years with reporters Jeff Gerth, Jayson Blair, and Judith Miller at The New York Times. Unlike Times’ editors Howell Raines and Gerald Boyd, who in Miller’s case continually reaffirmed the paper’s faith in her by putting her misguided stories on page one, however, the Asahi Shimbun owned up to its errors and promptly fired the reporter—putting, as it were, an end to the story (which isn’t the case, yet, with the Times’ “Judygate”).
So while foreign observers of Japanese media might applaud this gesture to truth in reporting, what continues to agitate them—when they aren’t in parody mode—is kisha kurabu, the so-called reporters’ clubs attached to various governments, businesses, and institutions. These press clubs regulate membership, set accreditation rules, and preside over journalists’ bullpens and working rooms that are set aside in public buildings.

Generally, an accredited media organization (such as Asahi Shimbun) can use the space for free. Telephones, faxes, and now Internet connections are provided, sometimes service personnel are made available, as are other facilities. This is not unlike the reporter’s bullpen on the upper floors of the United Nations headquarters in New York City or the press room of the White House. The journalists who are granted access are accredited as well—by the UN or by the White House—and theoretically not just anyone can walk in.

Reporters who regularly cover the U.S. president, for example, obtain a “hard pass” to enter the White House, presumably after passing muster and tough White House security.

Jeff Gannon, who reported for an organization calling itself Talon News, a conservative news service linked to the Republican Party, proved the exception, however. Because of Gannon’s softball (some would say sycophantic) questions, the White House press secretary was eager to call upon him, doing so with regularity. This so irritated bona fide reporters that in early 2005 some checking was done into Gannon’s background: he was a blogger with an assumed name and questionable
journalistic credentials; Gannon was also revealed to be a “male escort” and a “gay prostitute.”

I mention these bits of information because I imagine the lights in the reporters’ bullpen at the UN, and in the White House press corps area, too, are paid for by the respective institutions and not the reporters themselves or the publications they work for. Credentialing of reporters and providing them space, as O’Dwyer makes clear, is standard practice in a variety of venues, even if people like Gannon get in. That gets us back to kisha clubs.

The point is, they are not that unusual in and of themselves. In other countries, press clubs resemble kisha clubs, with important exceptions as I will explain. These are voluntary organizations that aid in news-collecting and news-reporting activities. They are organized by journalists who regularly collect news from official organizations and other sources. In fact, in Japan there are an increasing number of kisha clubs where the employers of the journalists pay the costs of the facilities, not the institution being covered. Kisha clubs have been around for over 100 years.

Reports vary as to how many kisha clubs there are in the country. Reporters Sans Frontières puts the figure at 1,500, but the official number is something like 800. This includes not only those clubs attached to governmental bodies such as the Prime Minister’s Office and the Foreign Ministry, but the Imperial Palace, large firms and organizations, local governments, sports, consumer and entertainment organizations, as well as political parties. The press corps itself is something on the order of 12,000, coming from around 160 media outlets.

Implicit in the criticism of Japanese media—from the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan as well as scholars and observers—is that because of this relationship fostered in kisha clubs, the Japanese media tend to be compliant with those they report on. That is, a too-close relationship grows between reporters and the focus of their reporting—government bureaucrats, politicians, business leaders, union leaders, police officials, politicians, and so on. The stream of information that is provided via the clubs, so the charge goes, has the effect of controlling not only the flow of news, but the very agenda of news, even if this is an indirect effect. This is the quality of the media complained of.

More seriously, reporters (and by implication the publications they work for) risk being excluded from the club, and thereby the flow of news, should they violate the club’s unspoken rules concerning the cozy relationship between, say, reporters on the one hand and government bureaucrats on the other. An often cited example is the so-called “self-control” that media exercise over anything related to the imperial family. Yes, it’s true: In 1988, the media made no mention that the Showa Emperor was suffering from cancer—although it seemed to be common knowledge. (But even now, a Japanese physician probably wouldn’t tell you your own cancer diagnosis and would whisper it to your family instead). To media critics, let me say, this is old news.

The new news is that, in November 2004, the Asahi Shimbun published a scoop about the engagement of Princess Nori to the commoner, Yoshiki Kuroda, an employee of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. The morning paper indicated that announcement of the engagement had been postponed to year’s end because of
severe typhoons and earthquakes in Niigata Prefecture. A royal engagement in the face of natural disaster was not seen as fitting. But not only did Asahi run with the story anyway, they won an award at the National Newspaper Convention for their reporting. The “chrysanthemum taboo” has, to a certain extent, fallen.

And the reporter who scooped the imperial engagement and got front-page coverage, Katsumi Iwai, is still working. It might be recalled here that this news came from a paper whose two staff members were shot—and one killed—after their paper reported on criticism of the Showa Emperor’s role in World War II. The reporter and photographer had nothing to do with the report on the emperor. The murder remains unsolved, but ultra-nationalists are assumed to have been behind the deaths.

Times have changed in Japan in other ways as well, particularly since the 1990s in the political sphere. With somewhat greater competition, politicians have needed the press to make their case to the general public. News media in turn have been more aggressive in questioning public officials and in reporting the plurality of views on national policy. Taking their cue from this trend, younger Diet members are beginning to speak out, even when their views differ from their elders’. This is new news. Before the 1990s, the only news that made the news was filtered through faction bosses and reported through kisha clubs attached to party headquarters. These days one might even hear conflicting opinions within Prime Minister Jun’ichiro Koizumi’s own party.

Lest the excitement get out of hand, media critic Tony McNicol, in his review of Ofer Feldman’s Talking Politics in Japan Today, cautions: “Although political coverage has become more varied and interesting, it has not led to more straight talk from politicians. While the media are now making politicians talk, most have retained their wariness of committing themselves… In effect, the media are asking more questions, but politicians are replying with equivocation and obfuscation.”

Surprise! The number two economy is more like the number one after all.

There are, I think, at least two main issues of interest here. One concerns foreign journalists’ access to news sources within Japan. The other relates to what we might call “beat journalism” and what critics allege is self-censorship by journalists.

Since reporters and their employers are accredited kisha club by kisha club, and since the clubs are imbedded in specific institutions and bureaucracies, the “free flow of information,” as the Reporters Sans Frontières would have it, is at risk. The European Union is right to make repeated demands that foreign journalists have the same access to information as Japan’s major media outlets. There are subtleties to this argument about access on both sides that have to do with economic competition and legions of engaging stories, as O’Dwyer recounts. One story involves the now-infamous encounters of Bloomberg News’s Dave Butts at the Tokyo Stock Exchange as he lost patience waiting around for the foreign reporters’ turn to get their copies of quarterly financial reports. He grabbed his copies, which caused a fracas, but in the end the rules got changed – access improved.

Foreign journalists’ access to news sources should be a no-brainer for the Japanese government: Of course foreign journalists should be given equal footing with their domestic peers. The suggestion by the kisha clubs that foreign reporters might be
given unrestricted access to press conferences but not to the clubs brings up whole issues of trade protection—which opens up a wholly different line of inquiry.

The context of the problem, if one were not aware, is that the *kisha* clubs are controlled by Japanese media outlets through their own press associations such as Federation of Newspapers, the Association of Commercial Broadcasting Stations, and the Federation of Magazines. The associations—*kyokai*—are media “trade groups” that closely oversee clubs within their purview. The associations establish, in effect “closed shops”. Laurie Freeman has called these associations, such as the Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association, the managers of a media oligopoly.\(^\text{10}\) Looking at individual clubs without the larger picture of the *kyokai*, the industry associations, ignores a good part of the comparative effort that O’Dwyer intends in her “Siblings or Strangers?” article.

The clever thing about this delicate shadow play is that through membership in an association, certain Japanese media companies gain access to *kisha* clubs. Everyone outside—and this includes Japanese weeklies and magazines, freelancers, and until recently foreign media—is excluded. So while the news may now be subject to lesser control, the timing of access to the news continues under strict control. This is an age in which the value of news is measured in minutes. In the same way that free on-line stock market reports are 15–20 minutes delayed, I am sure that *Jiji Press* and *Kyodo News* would like nothing better than to have readers rely on them—to pay, that is—for real-time news, rather than to allow *Reuters* or *Bloomberg News* to muscle in—and share in the wealth.

As *Jiji* notes on its Website, “Accuracy and speed are vital to our services, delivered to about 140 newspapers, broadcasters and publishers throughout the country and also to the general public directly via the Internet.” The point is, the “free flow of information” isn’t free. It has a larger economic dimension that involves a fight between specific Japanese interests and large international news organizations. But if you’re willing to wait those 15–20 minutes, you too will be privy to that “free flow” of news.

In accrediting their membership and the reporters to the clubs, the media associations thus protect their economic interests in the flow of news. The oligopoly in the flow of news—if that is the problem—may not only be found in the source of news itself, the government ministry, the stock market, the large organization, but in the Japanese news organizations and their associations that accredit reporters to them. It is a complicated link that has not been well studied or researched or given the consideration it demands.

The second issue, as I’ve said, has to do with “beat journalism.” A standard definition of beat journalism suggests turf and reporters. That is, beat journalists are typically location-bound to a specific ministry, agency, or organization. Japanese reporters, by and large, are assigned to cover a delimited territory closely tied to a *kisha* club and its associated turf. In fact, the *kisha* club is where many of the reporters do their work. Thus, in a sense, Japanese reporters, are unlike their foreign counterparts in Japan or abroad, domicile in their beat. This creates intimate relationships with the sources of information.\(^\text{11}\)
Within these relationships accrue all the attendant perils of beat journalism, including self-censorship, co-optation, and symbiosis. This state of affairs is a widely observed phenomenon of beat journalists around the world (see Judith Miller and her pre-Iraq war WMD reportage in *The New York Times*), but in Japan, beat journalism is more the rule than not. In fact, the preponderance of beat reporters over general assignment reporters may be one of the defining characteristics of Japanese media.

If you think about it, most news is quite location-bound, too. While news can take place anywhere, recurring news, the largest category of all news types, mostly happens in predictable hot spots. In Japan, those hot spots for news are the 800-plus locations where *kisha* clubs just happen to be located and where the clubs exert enormous turf control. The issue is not whether there is or isn’t a *kisha* club, the issue is who controls the turf. That’s what makes membership so critical and the clubs so powerful.

These considerations about beat journalism cast further light on the accommodation that foreign correspondents could be allowed into press conferences but not into *kisha* clubs themselves. This is separate but unequal treatment. Access denied to the entire turf is access denied to all the news—because the clubs sit astride the news hot spots.

Media monopolies are not unique to Japan, but O’Dwyer’s pointing to the existence of *kisha* clubs in Japan and noting that Australia, and other countries too, have press clubs misses the context and texture. I dare say that even pointing to a Japanese newspaper and a foreign counterpart and uttering the word “newspaper” is hardly revelatory of the nature of the two objects. The comment on form—words printed on newsprint—largely misses the content contained therein. *The Australian Financial Review*, for example, is not to a Japanese tabloid as press clubs are not to *kisha* clubs. To claim that would border on parody.

Arguments by comparison are more complex than meets the eye. In this case, comparative argument by analogy or argument by identification is not sufficient to make a claim. A simple argument by analogy doesn’t work because, in the case of Japan, the larger institutional level cannot be ignored. More seriously, the illustration, one might say, invalidates the comparative cases—Japan and Australia. For example, if we were to write that “X newspaper has three times the subscribers of Y,” the argument proceeds in a way where we are comparing realities susceptible of proof. But, with press clubs, a more complex consideration, we require a fuller comparative argument. Nevertheless, there is great value in assessing one set of media institutions against another, and Jane O’Dwyer’s article sharpens our perspective even as we might raise questions about the adequacy of the illustration.

**Endnotes**

1. The author acknowledges the comments in Tokyo of editor Elmer Luke and translator Alfred Birnbaum; and in New York City of reporter and author Yoshiharu Muto.
4. Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association, “Facts and Figures about Japanese Newspapers,” www.pressnet.or.jp/. For English readers, please note that the English Webpages are not up-to-date and list the previous two-year survey results.

5. The reporter later recanted parts of his explanation. The second reason given for his fabrication was “pride”. He did not want to admit his laziness in failing to interview the politicians. The rationale seems somewhat complicated psychologically. In any event, the reporter assumed that his superiors would use the “two-source rule” and confirm his story. In the heat of election reporting, this was neglected.


7. Gannon’s website is static, “In consideration of the welfare of me and my family I have decided to return to private life.” See jeffgannon.com.


11. Commenting on this matter, Japanese reporter and author Yoshiharu Muto has this to say, “Problems symbolized in the kisha club system are mainly because Japanese culture doesn’t have a public language in its strict sense. You cannot obtain specific information unless you have a private relationship to the sources. And this kind of information is handed to you only in private conversation.” E-mail communication, Nov. 7, 2005.

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