

Journalism In Postwar Japan

By

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The Changing Media Environment and It's Impact on Journalism Values
Perspective from Japan by Kyoko Ito

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Introduction

The North-South information gap has long been a matter of concern but recent technological progress has helped bring about major global change. The end of the Cold War was undoubtedly promoted by the accelerated transmission and reception of world news on a global scale. In Europe, news from the Western bloc began to reach the Eastern bloc from the sky by communication satellites, and this played a crucial role in bringing about sudden changes in the political scene in that part of the world. So, it is no exaggeration to say that satellite broadcasts changed the world. But it is regrettable that, as a result of such political change, some countries suffer from miserable worsened living conditions and regional armed conflicts continue to spring up one after another.

Today man-made satellites crowd the orbit 36,000 km above the earth. If we consider countries that possess positioning rights for the future launching of satellites, this orbit will soon be packed to the limit. In addition to the internationally operated INTELSAT, INMALSAT and INTERSPUTNIK, which all have been valuable in conveying news around the world, a large number of satellites owned by individual countries are now joining in. Indonesia's PARAPA C Series, Indian's INSAT took the initiative in this trend, while Indonesian's INDOSAT is about to be launched, followed by South Korea's KOREASAT to be launched this August 7, and Malaysia's MEASAT scheduled for launching either this year or next. Thailand's THAICOM is already in operation. Japan's broadcasting satellites have long been in use for satellite broadcasts, while communication satellites are used to provide CATV and other services.

Geographical Features and Japanese Life

How has the launching of satellites affected values in Japanese life?

The fact that Japan is an island country, stretching from north to south, has created considerable regional differences in lifestyle, dialects and customs. For instance, the northernmost main island of Hokkaido is located at about the same latitude as northern European

countries (around 43) and is covered with snow from November through May of the following year. The southernmost prefecture Okinawa, on the other hand, lies in around 26 degrees latitude, and snow never falls there. It is even warm enough in winter to swim in the sea. Japan is often described as a country with four distinct seasons, but strictly speaking, this is true on the main island Honshu, where Tokyo is located.

The Japanese island chain is divided into 47 prefectures, with its own local features. Japan has a total area of 377,735 km and a total population of around 124 million. Its capital, Tokyo, has an area of 2,183.44 km with around 11.8 million people. (according to the national census of 1994.)

70th Anniversary of the Start of Broadcasting in Japan

1995 marks the 70th anniversary of Japan's first radio broadcasts. Compared with TV broadcasts, which began 42 years ago, radio has a more turbulent history. Before World War Two, Japan had only one radio station, operating two services. During World War Two radio was used for propaganda by the military authorities, so that listeners were denied access to accurate news and information. The same was true for newspapers. All news and information conveyed to the Japanese people were controlled by the government. Education was no exception. School textbooks were compiled by the state, and were subject to censorship. Teachers received lopsided training from the Ministry of Education, and the education they gave was government controlled. Since the Japanese government suppressed unfavorable news and information, individual Japanese remained ill-informed. The general policy of putting the government above true public meant that people had an access only to material favorable and convenient for the government, which deliberately twisted the truth. A so-called obscurantist policy was adopted to keep facts away, from ordinary Japanese. If anyone dared to oppose government policies, he would be arrested immediately by the police. For fear of this, most people kept their mouths shut, never expressing their political views. Japanese in general were expected to blindly accept what the government said, and they were deprived of the freedom of speech.

Radio Broadcasts in Wartime

At 7:00 a.m. Japan time on December 8, 1941, a special radio announcement told the Japanese public that the Japanese military had plunged into a state of war in Pacific. Radio broadcasts contained only what would stir up public support, for the war and benefit the military. The slightest skepticism about such lopsided broadcasts was totally banned. Japanese radio and newspapers were still very immature as information media.

It is undeniable that Japan was terribly at fault in the last war. Today, 50 years after, Japan must humbly admit the blunder it committed and make sincere apologies to the world, especially to other Asian countries.

During the immediate postwar years, Japan was occupied by the Allied forces and all mass media were put under their supervision. Radio news scripts were checked by GHQ in order to firmly establish democracy in Japan and help this country break away from its evil prewar system. But this process involved the enormous task of implanting democracy in the minds of Japanese. Women's suffrage was introduced as part of efforts to introduce democracy to Japan, but even today, many Japanese still find it difficult to fully understand what sexual equality really means. However, thanks to radio and TV broadcasts, the idea of democracy was spread far and wide, helping many Japanese to grasp its meaning.

The Japanese Smile

Much of Japan was reduced to rubble as a result of the war. Insufficient school facilities forced teachers to conduct open-air classes, or to divide classes into two shifts. This situation continued for some time. Food was also scarce, but Japanese poured all their energy into productive activities for postwar reconstruction.

TV broadcasting began in 1953, and the standard of living also began to improve around that time. The prime minister at that time recommended lives of austerity by saying that barley instead of rice should be the staple food for the poor (although even barley was not easily available during the war, so that many Japanese ate weeds.) The goal of doubling monthly income was introduced, and mass media was instrumental in spreading nationwide the government

policy that ensured increased income in proportion to hard work. The 1960's was a decade of remarkable economic growth, as Japanese put heart and soul into their work. Consequently, Japan achieved the world's No. 2 rank in economic development, following the United States. Today, however, Japan is in a very difficult economic situation. This may be a logical outcome of the workaholism which has been criticized throughout the world, or an inevitable result of reckless efforts to become rich quickly, a goal promoted both nationally and individually. Japanese should take to heart the old saying, "Too much of anything is good for nothing."

Foreigners say that a lack of words and the so-called Japanese smile often create a communication gap, leading to misunderstanding. As indicated by such sayings as "the eyes speak better than mouth," "tuning in to each other" and "tacit understanding," Japanese often feel comparatively little need for verbal communication in their daily lives. But Japan cannot isolate itself from the rest of the world. Without material resources of its own, Japan must strive to develop good international relations, by cultivating the habit of verbal communication to avoid misunderstandings by non-Japanese. Indeed, this is a minimum goal for human beings as a whole, regardless of whether their nations have natural resources or not. Everyone wants to preserve an environment that fosters mutual understanding.

"No Grass will Grow in Hiroshima for the Next 80 Years ..."

After the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, people stood on the burnt ruins and said, "No grass will grow in Hiroshima for the next 80 years." But today we see a variety of trees presented by countries around the world fully grown in Hiroshima's Peace Park, with its atomic bomb museum. Survivors of the atomic bombing, however, are still suffering from the aftereffects of radiation, and they constantly fear that such aftereffects may be passed on to their children and grandchildren.

Satellite Relays of the Tokyo Olympics

A satellite relay test between Japan and the United States succeeded in 1963, and the first pictures transmitted across the Pacific for public broadcasts were of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. In the following year, 1964, Japan hosted the Tokyo Olympics. This

experience produced in Japanese a certain confidence, in that they could successfully organize and conduct an international event on the scale of the Olympics with advanced technology such as satellite broadcasting, vital for international relays in real time.

TV has contributed to the gradual lessening of Japan's regional differences and to extreme centralization in Tokyo. Customs and dialects unique to each region are becoming things of the past, as the standard Japanese language used in broadcasts is being spoken across the country.

This tendency does not mean that local dialects and cultures have been internationally slighted, although it is undeniable that nationwide broadcasts have spurred the standardization of Japanese culture. Fads and fashions spread inevitably to every corner of the country. In terms of broadcasting hours, nationwide broadcasts by far surpass those of local stations. There are a total of nine TV channels nationwide network broadcasts, with NHK using two terrestrial channels and two satellite channels, plus experimental HDTV and there are also four commercial stations. NHK has seven regional key stations across the country, in addition to its broadcasting center in Tokyo. Furthermore, it has local station in each prefecture, connected with one of the seven regional key stations, in order to cover local news. But in fact, the time slot for local programming on NHK's General TV is only about an hour a day on the average (including the programs of the regional key stations.) All the commercial networks offer the same programming nationwide.

Borderless TV

Over the skies of Asia, broadcasting satellite now send out many signals, and their reception is entirely an individual choice. Japanese people are free to receive programs via satellite, and the Broadcast Law which was revised in 1990 allows broadcasters to include these in their programming.

Japanese often say that some of their national traits are hard for non-Japanese to understand. What makes them think so?

Japanese fully recognize the importance of understanding other cultures, and the need to expand their

views by having as many contacts as possible with people from other countries. Watching foreign TV programs are quite helpful in this respect. One of Japan's most urgent tasks is to foster a internationally competent workforce, and TV is highly instrumental in providing opportunities to come in contact with other cultures. But at the same time there is a sense of hesitation about blindly accepting anything foreign as good, and rejecting traditional manners and customs handed down over the years. Indeed, some elderly Japanese frown at such attitudes among young Japanese today.

The Harajuku district of Tokyo is a mecca for trendy young people. Fads and fashions originating there quickly spread to the remotest part of Japan. These are admired by young people but are often despised by adults. "Harajuku culture" usually seems no more than an imitation of American pop culture. What Japan needs now is to have as many intelligent and thoughtful people as possible, people who are capable of perceiving what is most important for their nation.

The Japanese constitution guarantees freedom of belief and expression. Major incidents have occurred as people take advantage of this freedom. The constitution also supports equality of education; nine years of compulsory public education are provided free of charge, but most of junior high school graduates choose to receive 12 years of education in all.

In the 50th year after World War Two, Japan now faces many problems that require review. The two-party system which began in 1955, with a governing conservative party and a reformist opposition party, has now collapsed, greatly changing the framework of Japan's politics, bureaucracy, the financial world and labor unions. The mass media is naturally required to review its coverage and reporting systems.

Ever since the end of World War Two, Japan has consistently pursued the goal of economic reconstruction, and has become the world's second largest economy, with a consistent surplus in its balance of payments. But today Singapore has become the wonder of the world because of its remarkable economic growth, while similar growth is being achieved by South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Some economists say the Japan's energy has been exhausted, with no recovery in sight by the end of this century. It

may be high time for Japanese to stop and rethink where they should go from here. In the meantime, we should take in as much knowledge as possible about other cultures through satellite broadcasts, and store it for reference in determining Japan's future course.

The problem is that most programs from overseas are made in the United States or Europe. It is true that the North-South information gap is being narrowed thanks to rapid progress in satellite broadcasting technology, but the North continues to dominate as a transmitter. The impression of one-way transmission cannot be denied. More transmission from Asia should be our goal for the immediate future. Hong Kong's Star TV was among the first to transmit from Asia, but most of its broadcast programs were made in America. Two years ago Star TV revised its programming and transmission system, as part of an effort to discover a new role. The establishment of different channels for different languages and programming is being considered, to cater to the needs of Asian viewers. This may be a natural result of taking in account the cultural differences of each country.

In Japan, NHK started overseas satellite TV broadcasting this past April. Called TV Japan, this is designed to transmit 12 hours a day of news and information, mainly to the Japanese residents in Europe and America as well as other Asian countries. We certainly hope that TV Japan will also prove helpful for the people of other countries in understanding our country.

Transmission of information should be bilateral and contribute to mutual exchanges. We should strive to achieve this goal without losing the identity of each country.