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**Japan's Press Clubs as Information Cartels**

**by Laurie A. Freeman**

When a scholar embarks on field research, perhaps no question looms larger than the theoretical significance of the project at hand. So it was when I began to study Japan's ubiquitous and institutionally distinctive press clubs. Were these institutional anomalies of interest only because they were precisely that, anomalies, or did they play a larger role in the framing and presentation of important political and social issues and the way such issues were understood by society and elites in Japan? In short, were Japan's press clubs merely functional equivalents of news-gathering and news-dissemination routines found in other advanced industrial democracies, or did they have a substantively different impact on the way "reality" is socially constructed in Japan and the functioning of Japanese democracy?

I was pleased, therefore, when I was invited by *Asahi Shimbun*, one of Japan's most prestigious newspapers, to observe the press clubs in the Liberal Democratic Party's headquarters, the Diet and the Prime Minister's office. My hope was to be able to gain a better understanding of the role of the press clubs by observing them first-hand. I did not expect the experience to be the revelation it soon proved to be. Within a month, I was witness to a media event that was to color my understanding of the relationship between media and elites in Japan and the role the press clubs play in that relationship.

In late May 1990, several weeks before then Korean President Roh Tae Woo was to make an official visit to Japan, the Japanese press began to write a flurry of articles whose central focus was the possible wording of the speech (*okotoba*) that the Emperor was to make during an official reception honoring the Korean President. (This became known as the *okotoba mondai*, or the issue of the "honorable words," the words in question being the way the Emperor might broach an apology for the colonization of Korea and wartime atrocities.)

Each news organization tried frantically to out-scoop its competitors by being the first to publish the actual text of that speech. As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Liberal Democratic Party, and the Imperial Household Agency were themselves at odds over how Japan should respond, a considerable amount of 'leaking' of what was purported to be the actual text of the speech went on, resulting in somewhat conflicting news reports.

Things came to a head on the morning of May 15, just ten days before Roh was to arrive in Japan. On that day, every major Japanese newspaper carried a front-page headline referring

to the now famous *dogeza hatsugen* (prostration comment) that they uniformly attributed to “one of the heads of the Liberal Democratic Party” (*jiminto shuno*). The term *jiminto shuno* (LDP heads) is a common phrase used by the media when they decide not directly to attribute a statement. The initiated know that this phrase can only mean one of three individuals: the prime minister, the party secretary general, or the chief cabinet secretary (at that time, respectively, Kaifu, Ozawa, and Sakamoto). The remark read in part, “. . . it is because we have reflected on the past that we cooperate with Korea economically. Is it really necessary to grovel on our hands and knees and prostrate ourselves any more than we already have . . .?”

Although the Japanese media did not attribute the remark directly, the Korean media soon began to report that it had been made by Ozawa Ichiro. The following day, during a meeting with top LDP politicians, Ozawa apologized for having allowed the problem to escalate, and later that day he met with South Korean Ambassador to Japan Lee Won Kyung and apologized directly. Japanese newspaper reports of these two meetings were written in such a way that it was never made clear whether Ozawa had apologized for a statement he himself had made, or one that was made by some other “head of the LDP”(again, this could only have been either the prime minister or the chief cabinet secretary).

On the evening of May 16th, however, the *Asahi Shimbun*, often touted as the *New York Times of Japan*, broke ranks with a front-page headline article in which the newspaper claimed that the *dogeza* (prostration) statement had in fact been made by Ozawa. By the following day, however, the *Asahi* reverted to the phrase “one of the heads of the LDP” when referring to the incident, and in the weeks that followed affiliated publications refrained from attributing the statement to any single individual. What had happened to make *Asahi*, in effect, retract its attribution?

By attributing the *dogeza hatsugen* to Ozawa, *Asahi* had broken a tacit understanding within the press club that statements made during certain types of briefings can be quoted but not attributed. *Asahi* claimed that once Ozawa had made the apology to the LDP heads and to the Korean Ambassador such tacit understandings were no longer applicable. However, by attributing the quote directly to Ozawa, *Asahi* had effectively scooped its competitors. Naturally, *Asahi's* competitors in the club were outraged and called for a general meeting of the club members during which *Asahi* journalists were made to explain their actions. After the *Asahi* representatives explained their rationale, they were asked to leave the room and the other club members came up with a list of demands (punishments) that were to be followed by *Asahi*. These included a written apology to the club written by the appropriate person from the *Asahi's* political desk, a personal apology to Secretary General Ozawa by a representative from the *Asahi*, and a ban on any *Asahi*-affiliated publications referring to “Secretary Ozawa’s *dogeza hatsugen*.” The club members stated that they would take a “wait and see” attitude with respect to measures to prohibit Diet attendance by *Asahi*, but threatened that if similar problems arose in the future they would take such measures. Meanwhile, *Asahi* and its affiliates abided by the demands, and several weeks later the journalist who had been responsible for covering Mr. Ozawa and attending

his briefings was transferred to a club in the labor ministry (although *Asahi* claims they had previously planned this transfer).

The practice of press group self-censorship is one of the most noteworthy aspects of the Japanese press club system. Codified and institutionalized, the practice is made possible by the cartel-like conditions that form the basis of the club system itself. When one is confronted first-hand by the implications of these practices, it becomes increasingly difficult to view Japan's press clubs as functional equivalents of the general journalistic practice found in other countries to withhold certain information to protect sources. Although I stayed in Japan for many months, collecting data and establishing my own network of relations, I was grateful that I had been given this serendipitous opportunity to learn very early on that not only were Japan's press clubs distinctive, they also performed a function in controlling the flow and interpretation of information at an industry-wide level, the equivalent of which one would be hard-pressed to find elsewhere.

### **How the Clubs Function**

In Japan (and to a lesser extent in Britain), the information-gathering process takes place within a "closed shop" made up of journalists having proprietary access to information and sources. Contact with official sources is limited to a select group of individuals or organizations that have established a clearly-defined, if not codified, set of rules and practices. The perpetuation of the closed shop is guaranteed by the enforcement of sanctions or the threat of their enforcement. These define the basic features of what I term Japan's "information cartels."

The main focal point for these interactions is the press club (*kisha kurabu*). Located in most major governmental, political, and business organizations, Japan's press clubs serve to control the access to and presentation of news. In Tokyo, they can be found in every ministry, the headquarters of all of the major political parties, important economic organizations such as *Keidanren*, and other sports, entertainment, and consumer organizations. In the prefectures and larger cities, press clubs are located in local parliaments, police headquarters, the courts and chambers of commerce. They can also be found in research hospitals and major universities.

Although some of Japan's larger corporations have meeting rooms (*oenshitsu*) that they call *kisha kurabu*, in general, private companies do not have their own press clubs. Exceptions include the clubs attached to the Japan Railways (JR) and NTT, two companies that were privatized in the 1980s. "Semi-private" organizations--private companies providing public service--such as the Japan Atomic Energy Headquarters and the Tokyo Electric Company also have press clubs attached to them. Likewise, NHK, a private non-profit corporation established by the government in 1950, has its own press club and is unique among media organizations in this respect.

The exact number of press clubs in Japan is not known. Kawai Ryosuke, a media scholar, has suggested that there are as many as 1000 clubs nationwide, while Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association (JNPEA) documents generally use the considerably

lower figure of 400. Probably the actual number falls somewhere in between. Nishiyama Takesuke, a former journalist and editor for Kyodo Tsushin writes that in 1986, Kyodo dispatched journalists to 612 clubs throughout the country, 99 of which were in Tokyo. A more recent article on the press clubs published by *Asahi Shimbun* states that there are as many as 700 clubs throughout Japan and that *Asahi* journalists are dispatched to approximately 73 in Tokyo alone.

With the exception of a category of journalists known as *yugun*, or roving reporters, the press clubs serve as 'home base' for the majority of Japanese journalists. Typically arriving at their respective clubs early to mid-morning, Japanese journalists begin their day by reviewing the morning editions of rival newspapers, checking for any missed information. This may be followed by attendance at a regularly scheduled news conference, a post-conference *kondan* or informal briefing, a lecture on a related topic, or other activities having to do with the reporting of current events.

Journalists also leave the clubs to pursue stories and conduct interviews, but even these activities are carried out in an institutionalized fashion, and frequently as a group. Younger journalists covering the major political parties or the police and prosecutors' offices, for example, often spend a considerable portion of their day conducting morning and nightly rounds known as *asamawari* and *yomawari* (also referred to as *youchi-asagake*, or *satsumawari* in the case of the police). From early morning until quite late at night groups of (often neophyte) journalists follow powerful individuals with whom they ultimately develop very close (and at times quite deferential) relationships.

Promising young political journalists, for example, are often assigned to cover LDP faction bosses. These journalists, known as *ban* journalists (*ban kisha*) frequently start their day by going straight to the politician's home, arriving at about 7:30 in the morning. Together with journalists from other news organizations they greet the politician and then follow him or her around for most of the day, waiting for any tidbit of news that might be offered. In addition to gathering information, a good deal of time and effort is spent developing friendly relations with the politician they cover. Though most *ban* journalists will eventually be invited into a politician's home, a journalist is said to have been successful when he or she has developed relations sufficiently close with a source to have been allowed to enter a room of the house other than the special waiting room provided for journalists.

According to one report, a journalist's influence is based on a 1-4 ranking depending on what happens once they are inside a politician's house. At the first and lowest level, they are allowed to stay in a 4.5-mat tatami room at the entrance and greeted by the politician with a 'good morning.' Coffee is served. At the second level, they are allowed to enter the living room. Japanese sake is served. The third level can be reached only if one has graduated from the same university as the politician or is related to someone powerful. Here, one is allowed to enter the politician's study and, even if the politician is not there, can help oneself to Remy Martin. It is said that the highest class of journalists can nap in the politician's bedroom.

Journalists gain numerous benefits from participation in the clubs. As club members they have access to a large volume of information about government policies and activities. Additionally, they do not have to work hard to woo sources, as proximity to official sources is one of the benefits of membership, albeit a benefit shared by all members in common. One foreign correspondent in Japan suggests that, “the club system circuits the journalistic process of cultivating reliable sources, in short, by providing them.”

### **Those on the Outside**

A sign posted outside the door of most press clubs reads “off limits to non-members” (*kankeisha igai wa nyushitsu o kinjimasu*) and underscores the reality of the information-gathering process in Japan--namely, that it takes place within a ‘closed shop’ made up of journalists having proprietary access to information and sources. It is not surprising, then, that changes in membership criteria have been implemented infrequently since the broadcast media were permitted to join the clubs in the immediate postwar period. Although a significant modification of membership rules was made in the summer of 1993 when the JNPEA recommended that foreign journalists be given access, this ruling has had little impact on the day-to-day reality of those Japanese journalists hitherto excluded, and with the exception of foreign journalists working for business news services such as Bloomberg, the ruling has not greatly affected the way that foreign correspondents conduct newsgathering and write their stories. One reason, of course, is that foreign correspondents who join a Japanese press club have to abide by the club’s restrictions.

Although membership in a press club requires prior membership in the JNPEA, this is only a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition. Generally, in the case of the major clubs in Tokyo, access to information is limited to an even smaller and more exclusive group of news organizations holding a virtual monopoly over sources through their tight control over the day-to-day management of the clubs. In other words, not only have foreign correspondents, Japanese journalists working for weekly and news magazines, industry newspapers, party organs or as freelancers been excluded from the clubs by fiat; in practice, only the major 15-20 mainstream Japanese news organizations participate as regular club members in many of the clubs in Tokyo. Consequently, actual membership in the clubs is much less diverse than one might expect given a multi-media industry association that currently (1994) has 166 members--11 newspaper companies, 50 broadcast stations, and 5 news agencies.

Most clubs have anywhere from 15-150 members, almost all of whom work for companies belonging to the JNPEA. There are exceptions, of course. The largest press club in Tokyo, the Diet Club, is said to have 5,000 individual members. The *kantei*, or Prime Minister’s club is in second place, having 467 members in 1985. Still, even in these clubs the establishment of rules and the enforcement of sanctions are the responsibility of a much smaller group of companies--those having voting rights in the club *sokai*, or general committee. It is from the *sokai* membership, for example, that the club *kanji*, or supervisors--0positions that rotate every two to three months--are chosen. Club supervisors are responsible for handling any problems arising within the club and call emergency

meetings of regular members whenever a major rule violation has occurred. This was the kind of meeting convened over the Asahi's release of Ozawa's name.

As a consequence of these arrangements, control over the management and makeup of the clubs lies with a limited number of mainstream media outlets regardless of whom they let in. One author even goes so far as to suggest that the 'big five'--*Asahi*, *Yomiuri*, *Mainichi*, *Kyodo*, and *NHK* are "fighting it out for hegemony." Usually, approximately 17 companies participate as regular club members: the five national papers (*Asahi*, *Yomiuri*, *Mainichi*, *Sankei*, *Nikkei*); the four regional papers (*Hokkaido*, *Chunichi*, *Nishi Nihon*, *Tokyo*); two news agencies (*Jiji* and *Kyodo*); and six broadcast companies (*NHK*, *TBS*, *Nihon Terebi*, *Terebi Asahi*, *Fuji Terebi*, and *Terebi Tokyo*).

### **Inter-Club Competition**

The fact that membership is limited to a score of mainstream news organizations does not mean that there are only 15-20 journalists dispatched to a given club at any one time. A media organization may send anywhere from one to ten of its journalists to a press club. Membership in one club also does not guarantee access to any of the others. Journalists are usually assigned to a single club and cover only the issues arising from and related to the ministry or organization to which that club is attached. In most cases, they are refused access to press releases or news conferences sponsored by other clubs, even though other journalists from their company are members. A journalist generally remains in his or her assigned club for 2-3 years before being assigned to a new club in a different organization. One consequence of this practice is the considerable degree of sectionalism and territoriality that goes on between member of various clubs.

Often a journalist will feel closer to a competitor in his or her own club than to another journalist from the same company. This is particularly the case when the other journalist comes from another bureau. The political and social affairs bureaus, for example, are known to have an intense rivalry, in part because of the different types of tasks assigned to them. News sources are also aware of this intra-company sectionalism and use it to their advantage. As a rule, politicians and bureaucrats refuse to see social affairs journalists, and sources in the metropolitan police headquarters (which has historically been the territory of social affairs journalists) will not talk with political journalists or journalists from other clubs. This practice also explains why it is the social affairs journalists who generally write about scandals involving politicians and not the journalists from the political bureau. The social affairs journalists are not encumbered by the ties to sources and the rules that a political journalist in the clubs would be, though this also means that it is much more difficult to get information--even information that their 'colleagues' in the political bureau may well have but for obvious reasons can't write.

Some clubs have provisions in their club regulations for additional types of membership, and may allow participation by non-regular members and 'observers.' With the exception of foreign correspondents, who have been handled as a special category of journalist, as a rule, even non-regular members and observers must belong to the JNPEA, or at the very least be endorsed or sponsored by a member company. Club regulations for the Prime

Minister's club (the *kantei* club) written in 1984, for example, expressly exclude "journalists from news magazines, weekly magazines, government, political party and labor organs as well as industry papers."

Although some efforts have been made to reduce these restrictions on attendance, and there have been calls to reform the press club system, the organization responsible for implementing reforms--the JNPEA--has viewed the press club 'problem' mainly in terms of how to give access to foreign journalists while continuing to exclude those Japanese journalists who have always been prohibited.

One high-ranking member of the reform committee, referring to these journalists as the "semi-yellow journalists of Japan," said that the 'problem' as the committee saw it was to figure out how they might develop criteria that would give access to the "foreign 'bona fide' press, but exclude the local indigenous press." In other words, the committee felt compelled to include 'legitimate' foreign newspapers and such magazines as *Time* and *Newsweek*, but wanted to continue to exclude Japanese newspapers that were not JNPEA members as well as Japanese magazines.

Yet Japanese weekly and monthly magazines, such as *Bungei Shunju*, are precisely the ones that carry out investigative journalism and were responsible for breaking many of the recent corruption and other scandals involving politicians and bureaucrats. With the notable exception of the Recruit stock-for-favors scandal, which, in spite of its political nature was uncovered by a group of mainly social affairs journalists from Asahi working in a local office in Kawasaki city, a large number of political and other scandals--including the Lockheed scandal involving former prime minister Tanaka Kakuei, and the more recent expose that resulted in the ouster of former prime minister Hosokawa--have been broken by such magazines. That these scandals were written about by journalists and media organizations excluded from the press clubs is not, of course, merely coincidental.

A final point needs to be made about the relationship between Japanese journalists and organizations that are excluded from the clubs, and those that belong. Although one might expect a degree of animosity between the JNPEA (the newspaper association) and the JMPA (the magazine association), when the JNPEA was deliberating over the issue of giving access to foreigners, they contacted the JMPA to learn whether or not they would register a complaint if foreigners--including foreign magazines such as *Time*--were given access to clubs to which JMPA members themselves did not have access. Contrary to expectations, the JMPA replied that they would not care about or oppose this decision. Though their response might seem counter-intuitive, as a result of the informal arrangements magazine companies and magazine reporters have with individual newspaper and broadcast journalists in the clubs, the magazines have not felt a great need to demand access. They obtain information and stories another way--by paying journalists in the clubs to leak information or, more commonly, by having them write stories anonymously for the magazine.

Although such practices are frowned upon by the newspaper companies, the fact that many club journalists 'moonlight' in this way is widely recognized. The arrangement is mutually

beneficial for the press club journalists and the magazines. The journalists gain a source of extra income and an outlet for some of the information they have obtained but cannot write due to club embargoes and other tacit agreements with members of the club or sources. The magazines, which have small budgets and few reporters, find that developing close relations with newspaper journalists with access to important sources in the clubs and hiring them to write such stories makes bottom-line sense--it is more convenient and cheaper than sending some of their own rather limited staff, who would have great difficulty in obtaining information anyway. In a sense, though not a direct party to the information cartel, those excluded have their own reasons for doing relatively little to see that it is dismantled.

But there is a price for having information filtered in this way--a price paid by the public. Under this arrangement, because the magazine has gotten such information second or third hand, it either gets written as rumor or, because it is written anonymously and/or does not include an attribution of sources (a practice followed by club members and non-members alike), its news value and believability are seriously diminished.

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