

**JAPAN'S MASS MEDIA:  
INSULAR NEWS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD**

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**Abstract:** Globalization continues to bring the world closer together in many ways, but this does not necessarily mean that the news provided to us by the mass media is becoming more global in nature. This is particularly paradoxical, given the major advances in information and communication technology that should potentially have led to a broader perspective of the world as a whole. Among those countries with the financial and technological resources to build media with a global perspective, Japan in particular appears to be lagging behind in this regard. This paper begins by examining the proportion of world news provided by a variety of media corporations, and trends regarding the geographical distribution of world news. It then looks at the 'home' country angle that can be found in a certain proportion of the news that is ostensibly about the outside world. Finally, it discusses the policy implications of such an insular media, concluding that the current state of affairs leads to a narrow, subjective and incomplete view of the world at many levels in society that benefits neither Japan nor the world at large.

**Key-words:** News media; world news; Japan; globalization; agenda-setting.

**Resumo:** A globalização continua a aproximar o mundo de diversas formas, no entanto isso não significa que as notícias oferecidas pelos meios de comunicação social estão a tornar-se mais globais na sua essência. Isto é particularmente paradoxal, tendo em conta os grandes avanços na informação e tecnologias de comunicação que deviam potencialmente ter levado a uma perspectiva mais ampla do mundo como um todo. Entre os países com os recursos financeiros e tecnológicos para a criação de meios de comunicação social com uma perspectiva global, o Japão em particular, parece estar a ficar para trás neste contexto. Este artigo começa por examinar a proporção de notícias globais fornecidas por diversos média e as tendências em relação à distribuição geográfica de notícias do mundo. De seguida, analisa o ângulo do país de origem, que pode ser encontrado na proporção de notícias que são publicadas de forma ostensiva sobre o mundo exterior. Por fim, discute as implicações políticas dos órgãos de comunicação social com um carácter insular, concluindo que o actual estado de coisas leva a uma visão estreita, subjetiva e incompleta do mundo em muitos níveis da sociedade, o que não beneficia nem o Japão nem o mundo em geral.

**Palavras-chave:** agenda-setting; japonês; meios de comunicação social; notícias globais.

## Introduction

Globalization continues to accelerate the interconnectedness of the world as a whole, and, at least in terms of goods and finances, Japan is no exception. Calculated by calories, Japan imports some 60 percent of the food it consumes (Anon., 2014). Food diversity is also increasing, with restaurants boasting food from around the world opening throughout the country. Japan's manufacturing sector relies on raw materials of all varieties from throughout the world, and while many of these arrive in Japan indirectly and at various stages of processing, Japanese trading companies remain active in all corners of the globe. Exports of manufactured goods also continue on a massive scale. Japanese cars (both new and used) and electronics, among other commodities, continue to hold a major share in their respective sectors, and can also be found in all corners of the globe. Foreign direct investment outflows from Japan are high, and foreign currency and shares are advertised as investment opportunities for large and small scale investors alike.

Levels of interconnectedness drop off somewhat when it comes to the movement of people. While a large number of Japanese people travel for short-term business or pleasure, and Japan similarly takes in a large number of short-term businesspeople and tourists, this trend does not hold for long-term movements. Considering its large population, the numbers of those with Japanese citizenship studying abroad, working abroad or migrating, are relatively low. Equally importantly, Japan retains strict limits on immigration (Roberts, 2012), and effectively refuses to accept refugees. For the year 2013 Japan as a country recognized a total of just six refugees (Kingston, 2014).

One area in which we might have expected to see the effects of globalization over the past few decades in particular, however, is in the flow of information. Given the advances in information and communications technology, on top of the advances in transport technology, the world is potentially a much smaller place. Innovations like the internet (in general), and more specifically email, internet video and telephone services, and social networking services, have radically improved the flow of information between individuals and organizations. They have done the same for those in the business of gathering, processing and delivering the news. Television and radio journalists can now broadcast live from anywhere in the world to everywhere in the world, using increasingly smaller-sized equipment. They can even connect and report the news directly

using satellite phones or internet video and telephone call services. News can be spread instantly and at virtually no cost, using internet websites and social media, and news organizations and individual journalists maintain and frequently use Twitter accounts to share their news. Japan, at both a technological and consumption level, is certainly among the world leaders in this regard.

As such, Japan should thus have undoubtedly the capacity for, and quite possibly an interest in, an increasingly global perspective in its gathering, production and distribution of news. But how global, or even international, is the news in Japan? This paper attempts to address this question, examining the state of international news in Japan, both in terms of overall quantity and, to a limited degree, in terms of content, and goes on to draw some conclusions pertaining to the policy implications of this state of affairs.

### **Trends in world news**

Although there is no consensus on what proportion of the news national-level media corporations 'should' devote to news about the world beyond their country's borders, the proportion of world news offered by Japanese media corporations can be considered to be relatively small. A series of quantitative studies by the author measuring the proportion of world news found that 10 percent of the total amount of news appears to be the upper limit in news of any form.

News Watch 9, a one-hour commercial-free (and largely celebrity-free) news program broadcast by Japan's national public broadcaster, Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), at nine in the evening on weekdays, serves as one example. The author conducted a study on this news program for a six-month period between January and June 2012, measuring the length of time (in seconds) for each news segment. It found that international news made up 8.9 percent of the total amount, with the remainder being domestic news. News about society in general made up 20 percent, as did sports news, while politics accounted for 18 percent. Furthermore, only on very rare occasions was an international news item reported as a top news story. Of the 128 news programs studied, international 12 news items (roughly 9 percent of the total) were top news items, and 7 of those concerned the situation in North Korea.

Newspapers show similar trends. Most national newspapers devote just one or two pages, out of a total of 25 to 30 (non-advertisement) pages on average to international news. Some additional international news can be found on general-purpose pages found near the front of the newspaper, and, although it is not particularly common, international news does make the front page. But (unpublished) studies by the author (of the Yomiuri Shimbun and the Asahi Shimbun – the daily newspapers with the highest circulation) have failed to find levels of international news exceeding 10 percent of the total amount of news.

The internet is a game-changer of sorts for the distribution of news. Those in the newspaper business, when pressed on why levels of international news are relatively low, are quick to point out the near-prohibitive costs associated with printing additional pages in the newspaper, as well as a perceived lack of interest among their readers. The ability to release news online, however, levels the playing field in this regard – the publication of additional pages of news and information can be done at marginal cost. But this does not appear to have changed the proportion of international news. A study by the author of the archives of the top news stories distributed online by the popular aggregator news website Yahoo! Japan News, for the year 2010, found 10 percent of the stories were devoted to international news. This compared to 21 percent for domestic sports news and 17 percent for celebrity news.

How does this compare to the proportion of news coverage elsewhere? A number of studies have been conducted quantitatively breaking down news coverage in the USA. On the whole it would appear that news coverage in that country has fallen considerably since the end of the Cold War. A study of 16 newspapers, for example, found that the percentage of front page news stories focusing on foreign events was 14 percent in 2004, which was down from 27 percent in the 1970s and 1980s (Journalism.org, 2005). Even at 14 percent, this is still considerably higher than that in Japanese newspapers. The proportion of television news in the USA devoted to international affairs is also at much higher levels than its Japanese counterparts. The online Tyndall Report, which measures and analyzes the content of the main evening news programs, found that for the first decade of the 2000s, international news unrelated to US foreign policy (military activity in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example) accounted to 17 percent of the total quantity of news.

But it is not only the overall quantity of coverage of the world. It is also worth examining which parts of the world attract coverage and which do not. We can reasonably expect that there will be relatively higher levels of coverage for parts of the world that are close to Japan (geographically and culturally) and those that are perceived to have greater strategic (politically and economically) importance for Japan. Studies have shown, for example, that levels of trade, prominence (in terms of the size of gross national product, for example), and cultural and historical affinity, are among the major explanatory factors for levels of coverage for foreign countries (Tai, 2000; Golan, 2008).

A study by the author (Hawkins, 2002) of the international coverage by the Yomiuri Shimbun, Japan's best-selling daily newspaper, found that Asia attracted the highest levels of coverage (38 percent), followed by Europe at 24 percent and the Americas at 23 percent. The Middle East accounted for 8 percent of the coverage, while Africa made up less than 2 percent. Similar trends could be found in coverage by NHK on its New Watch 9 program, examined above. During the first half of 2012 on that program, Asia accounted for 45 percent of the international coverage, followed by Europe at 22 percent and North America at

13 percent. The top countries covered were North Korea (22 percent), the USA (13 percent), and China (7 percent). This high coverage of North Korea resulted from a (failed) long-range rocket launch from that country in April 2012. Broken down into individual incidents/topics, the North Korea launch was the most covered (15 percent), followed by the Euro crisis (10 percent), and Syrian conflict and Iran nuclear negotiations (each at 6 percent). Two exceptionally under-covered regions, on the other hand, were Africa and Latin America. Africa accounted for less than 5 percent of the total international coverage, but remarkably, all of this coverage was devoted to political turmoil in Egypt. That is, in this half-year period, no country in Africa, with the exception of Egypt received any coverage. The only coverage devoted to any Latin American country for this period, was Brazil, and this was a mere 30-second segment covering the annual carnival in that country.

The marginalization of Africa is a trend seen throughout the breadth of Japan's mass media (Hawkins, 2012). This marginalization is particularly worthy of consideration given the levels of armed conflict – something that, in other geographical locations, is all too often the focus of intense coverage by the media, and the Japanese media are no exception. Despite the fact that the known death toll from conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is literally hundreds of times greater than that in the case of conflict in Israel-Palestine, for example, it is the latter that is object of heavy media coverage by the Japanese media, with the latter remaining almost invisible. In the year 2000, for example, the conflict in Israel-Palestine accounted for 41 percent of the Yomiuri Shimbun coverage of conflict in the world for the entire year, while all African conflicts accounted for just 5 percent (Hawkins, 2002: 238). Meanwhile in another study by the author of the Asahi Shimbun, covering a five year period from July 2004 to June 2009, coverage of the conflict in Israel-Palestine attracted 25 times the quantity of coverage given to the conflict in the DRC. This, of course, mirrors (albeit often exceeds) trends in coverage by media in much of the world (see Hawkins, 2008).

### **The local in the global**

As noted above, much of the foreign news produced by media corporations is concerned with the home country's relations with the rest of the world, in this case, Japan. This often takes the form of reporting on Japanese citizens, either in terms of their accomplishments abroad, or as victims of disasters, crimes or conflicts. For many parts of the world that go largely uncovered by the media, this Japanese connection may be one of the few opportunities for those places to attract coverage, although the degree to which this enhances our knowledge and understanding of those places may well be questionable. The two incidents below involving Japanese citizens as victims in (ultimately fatal) hostage situations

serves to illustrate this point.

In January 2013, militants led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar (formerly affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb, or AQIM) attacked the Tigantourine gas facility located near In Amenas, Algeria, taking numerous hostages. Algerian forces intervened and the crisis ended, but it had left close to 80 people dead, including numerous militants and foreign hostages. Of the hostages, seventeen were Japanese citizens working for the JGC Corporation. Ten were confirmed dead. The Japanese media focused almost solely on the Japanese hostages, to the point that almost without exception (see Iishiai and Murayama, 2013 for one such exception), neither the numbers of hostages nor the number of deaths of those who were not Japanese, were reported (see, for example, Anon., 2013b). It was not a focus related to the corporation being Japanese – there were non-Japanese citizens working for JGC (foreign workers among them) who were also killed, but whose deaths went unreported. It was an issue of nationality.

It is, of course, standard practice in crisis journalism for media corporations throughout the world to focus on the plight of victims from the 'home' country, but in many cases, the focus on the home country connection is balanced in part by the provision of information that gives a broad overview of the situation as a whole. Articles in the *Guardian* (Walker, 2013), and BBC (Anon., 2013a), for example, published articles about the In Amenas incident that broke down the numbers of victims by nationality and gave some description about who they were and what they were doing.

Coverage in Japan as the crisis unfolded did, of course, attempt to make sense of the circumstances surrounding the incident – the place and situation in which the incident happened, who the perpetrators were, and why they were carrying out such an attack. This was not an easy task. The majority of people in Japan are undoubtedly aware of the group called Al-Qaeda, but are unlikely to have know of the existance of AQIM, or have any substantive level of awareness about the Magreb region or the overlapping geopolitical issues impacting on the incident in In Amenas, including the fact that the perpetrators of the attack were based in Mauritania, or the conflict in neighbouring Mali. These issues were largely brushed over in media reports on the issue, and the region quickly disappeared from media as the crisis came to a close. The most contentious issue surrounding the coverage of the incident in the end was that regarding the ethics of the decision by media corporations to release the names of the victims (see Shinbo, 2013).

More recently, the killing of two Japanese hostages by the Islamic State (IS) came as a rude shock for Japan. The Japanese media had focused on the Islamic State some months before, primarily because of the high-profile beheading of Western hostages, rather than because of its actual rise to power and control in parts of Iraq and Syria, but it was only with the hostage situation involving Japanese citizens that it was forced to take such an in-depth look. Countries that are almost never covered in the Japanese media, primarily Jordan, came to the

fore, as the fate of the Japanese hostages became ostensibly intertwined with that of a Jordanian pilot held captive by the IS and of a would-be suicide bomber on death row in Jordan. But the coverage was primarily dominated by the plight of the Japanese hostages themselves.

With the revelation that the second hostage, Kenji Goto, had been killed, the media began to express shock, sadness and anger. On one news program broadcast within several hours of his death, the main newscaster (Tomoko Nagano) appeared visibly upset, and angrily asked what might be translated as “how can (dare) they treat a person’s life this way?” “[hito no inochi wo nan da to omotte iru no ka?]” (Hodo Station Sunday, 2015). While it is understandable that this was the immediate aftermath of a brutal incident that had been the object of intense attention and scrutiny for many days, such an emotional (perhaps unprofessional) outburst from a newscaster is quite rare. Furthermore, behind the words used seemed to lie the betrayal to little cognizance of how the same group responsible for this killing had treated so many other lives.

This shock then turned to reflection. The first Japanese hostage killed (Haruna Yukawa) had been attempting to establish a private military corporation, and at the point of his capture was essentially a member of an armed group. This combined with issues he had had in his private life leading up to his foray into Syria (including a suicide attempt), made his story difficult to simply and to generate sympathy for. The Japanese media thus gave his death little coverage. The second hostage (Kenji Goto), on the other hand, was an independent video journalist who had worked to cover under-exposed conflict in the world and the suffering it brought about. His perceived innocence and apparent selflessness in the service of others, led to sympathy and subsequently to a high level of coverage of his death. The media repeatedly broadcast footage he had taken in conflict zones, showing the suffering of civilian men, women and children. They portrayed his dedication, his sacrifice, what he had given his life for. Ironically though, the mainstream media had shown little of his work in the past. And even in his death, his footage was used not to draw attention to the issues raised therein, as he had intended. It was shown primarily as evidence of Goto’s pure and brave intentions in life. The news was about him, not about what he had tried to show. The media did not see this incident as an opportunity for reflection on the need for greater awareness of the reality of the world and its conflicts, or as an opportunity to look at how neglected independent journalism in Japan is – how in the absence of a Japanese angle on a story, the mainstream media are all too often unwilling to buy and use footage from independent journalists like Goto on the frontlines in such parts of the world.

The media’s reflection then turned to a broader and more general level. In many of the programs aired on television, whether of the hard news or soft news variety, one of the themes shared by many commentators, celebrities and experts, was what seemed to be a self-reassuring perspective of a Japan that was loved and respected throughout the world, that the gesture of giving aid in the

Middle East had been misunderstood, and that Japan should continue to spread the word of peace (see, for example, TV Tokyo, 2015). At the same time was the message that the world was a frightening place, and the measures that should be taken to protect Japan and Japanese people. This was all too often combined with alarmist notions of the so-called Islamist extremist threat. World maps showing the location of groups such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabaab in Somalia – places and situations so rarely raised in the media – were used to briefly illustrate a frightening worldwide trend, without stopping to focus on the complex nuances of these situations. On the whole, news pertaining to the incident was kept largely within a Japan-centric frame.

But this kind of Japan-centric focus can be seen in almost every aspect of 'international' reporting. A check of the website of the popular weekday evening news program broadcast by TV Asahi, Hodo Station, for the year 2010, revealed a host of 'international' news stories with a Japanese focus. This included Japanese people who had won prestigious international prizes, such as a Nobel Prize, and international piano competitions, the exploits of a Japanese astronaut on the International Space Station, Japanese tourists hurt by debris from strong winds at the film site of a famous Korean drama TV show, and Japanese hot dog eating champion who had been arrested in New York. This can also be seen in the production of variety and documentary type television shows. One such popular show features celebrities travelling to the far corners of the earth to find a Japanese person who lives there, exploring what they are doing there and why. Such dedication to information gathering in such remote location is not often seen in the gathering of hard news.

### **Some policy implications**

The insular nature of the Japanese media helps to contribute to the explanation of certain aspects of Japan's foreign policy. To a degree and in certain respects, for example, we can see a lack of engagement with, and a lack of interest and/or ability in taking the lead in, issues affecting the world beyond what are perceived as the immediate and pressing security and economic needs of the country. The levels of Japanese official development assistance (ODA), for example, measured as a percentage of gross national income (GNI) are some of the lowest among Development Assistance Committee (DAC) countries. In 2013, for example, ODA from Japan stood at just 0.23 percent, less than one-third of the longstanding UN target of 0.7 percent (which admittedly, only a handful of countries are currently meeting) (OECD, 2014). The geographical distribution of humanitarian aid is also telling in this regard. In the year 1998, for example, the Japanese government gave more than three times the amount of emergency humanitarian aid in response to conflict in Kosovo than it did to all of Africa's emergencies combined, in spite of the fact that the death toll from conflict in

Kosovo (approximately 10,000) stood in stark contrast to that from conflict Africa, which had resulted in more than one million death in that same year (Hawkins, 2008: 70).

Japan's contribution to peacekeeping in the world, in terms of manpower, is also very limited. Japan currently has some 300 peacekeepers deployed in South Sudan. It is relatively rare for Japan to have a substantive contribution like this, but relatively speaking, it is quite small, considering that the United Nations is currently deploying some 100,000 peacekeepers worldwide. This must admittedly be seen in light of the limitations to the use of force allowed under Japan's famous peace constitution and other associated legislation, with deployment under such circumstances considered to be dangerous, depending on the situation (see Simpson, 2014). There is still room for greater contribution, however, perhaps in the more stable peacekeeping operations, and in contributions other than troops. Furthermore, we can also see but rare examples of the government of Japan attempting to take the lead in mediating in peace processes around the world. Japanese limitations on the use of force may hamper deployments of troops under peace operations, but on the other hand, the 'credentials' that the peace constitution offers in this regard could potentially be put to use in the field of such peacemaking.

The Japanese government, like other governments, clearly has no desire to expend blood or treasure, or risk loss in the form of reputation, in the pursuit of policies that are unlikely to help them, and which may conversely potentially harm them, in the arena of public approval ratings. In the absence of a strong degree of public opinion on such matters, or even an aversion to such policies by the public, often based on an ill-informed understanding of the situation in question, it is unlikely that the government will have an incentive to be proactive in this regard. It must also be said, however, that even when public opinion seems to be in favour of foreign adventures – the deployment of peacekeepers being a case in point – governments have been known to err on the cautious side, often citing what may be considered to be misreadings of public opinion (Isernia, 2000; Kull, 1995-6).

Regarding Japan's contribution to the amelioration and solution of foreign affairs issues, it is clear that there is a lack of incentive, or pressure, that the media might otherwise be able to bring to bear on the government, if it were able to offer a more global perspective. The media, by its minimalist coverage of the outside world, is not able to fulfil an agenda-setting function, influencing in a substantive manner the foreign affairs issues that public will think about – shaping public opinion (see, for example, McCombs, 2004). Nor is it able to hold the government to account, for example, when its emergency humanitarian aid or development assistance is clearly disproportionate to the needs when seen from an objective global level.

## Concluding remarks

Despite the emergence of ostensibly global media corporations, and what the national news corporations portray as international news, the media in the world in general has failed to globalize. Kai Hafez (2007) illustrates this phenomenon, calling the globalization of the media a “myth”. But by the same token, the media in Japan lags far behind its counterparts in much of the industrialized world – those who have the financial capability to gather, process and disseminate news from a global perspective. Furthermore, given that the majority of people in Japan do not have the ability to consume news effectively in a language other than Japanese, the population is largely at the mercy of Japan-based news corporations in this regard.

Ironically, the levels of media coverage that ostensibly reflect Japanese interest (public) and interests (strategic), by providing little and disproportionate coverage of the world, and by focusing on news with a ‘home’ connection – conversely serve to undermine both. In terms of public interest, it is easy for media corporations to claim that the public are not interested in distant events, and that their coverage reflects this reality. But this does not account for the fact that media are by no means a passive servant of public interest – they work to create and shape it, and the public can not develop an interest in something about which they are provided no information in the first place. Furthermore, when something does happen to a Japanese national abroad, particularly when they are targeted specifically because of the policies of their government, it is too late to begin to piece together, almost from scratch, an understanding of why this is the case, and how it can be fixed. And in the aftermath, as the media quickly move on to the next big story, it is not apparent that the lessons have been learned.

In terms of the national interests of Japan, a focus in the news on the problems at home rather than on the outside world may well be seen as necessary, and the media’s focus on a Japanese connection in its coverage of the outside world may also be seen as useful in bolstering a national/ethnic identity and a sense of patriotism/nationalism. But this fails to consider how connected the world really has become, and the implications that such levels of connectivity have for national interests, both in terms of threats and opportunities. This applies to the safety of Japanese citizens and corporate interests abroad, but also to Japan’s ability to secure the raw materials it needs and desires to keep it supplied and able to maintain and expand its manufacturing sector. And, given the inward-looking nature of secondary and tertiary education, and of the news media, one can only imagine the limited and narrow understanding of the world at large that recruits for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and for globally active trading companies and non-governmental organizations have. Furthermore, the lack of attention to global affairs by the media also results in a general public that lacks the ability and interest necessary to form, share and project to the government, informed

perspectives and demands regarding foreign affairs issues, particularly those that appear to be beyond immediate and pressing security concerns. In short, there is clearly a need for a greater democratization of foreign affairs decisions.

This current state of affairs cannot be seen as creating an environment conducive to safeguarding Japan's national interests in the long term. Nor is it conducive to the ability and willingness of Japan to make use of its financial wealth to improve the state of the world in which we live, in areas such as poverty reduction, conflict prevention, amelioration or resolution, or the halting and reversing of environmental degradation.

The killing of two Japanese hostages by the Islamic State in January 2015 came as a rude shock for Japan, but if the coverage of those events is any indication, it is unlikely that it will be an awakening. This is by no means the only recent experience that Japan has had with this type of painful interaction with the outside world, and little appears to have changed in the past. Japan's media remains largely insular and with a focus on the outside world that is, to a large degree, seen in terms of Japan's direct interaction with it. In the long run this will serve neither the interests of the Japanese people or its government, or the well-being of the world as a whole.

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