

# Can the News Media Create an Unfragmented Public Sphere?

The expansion of the media has had a considerable influence on democracy in Japan. However, in the past 20 years, newspaper circulation has declined significantly, and Internet news has become a new source of information. What is the best direction for news media in the future?

## About This Issue

### News Media at a Turning Point

#### – Creating an Unfragmented Public Sphere and Protecting the Soundness of Democracy

Masaki Taniguchi

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Keywords...The future of newspapers, news media, the true significance of journalism, the soundness of democracy, strategies of Japan's two major newspapers, public sphere, infrastructure for political communication

## Expert Opinions

### Can the News Media Create an Unfragmented Public Sphere?

What role should the news media play in democracy into the future?

And what strategies should be applied in the area of media management?

#### As a Reliable Media Format Offering Breaking News, the Role of Newspapers Will Become Increasingly Important

Shoichi Oikawa

Representative Director, Chairman of the Board and Senior Deputy Editor-in-Chief, International Operations (Editor-in-Chief, The Japan News), The Yomiuri Shimbun Holdings

Keywords...Accurate conveying of events, media that is not afraid to make a statement, newspapers for children and junior and senior high school students to increase future readers, planning of digital contents, diversification of management

#### Competing for the Information the Government Officials Are Willing to Give Is Not “Journalism”

Susumu Shimoyama

Author and Part-time Lecturer, Department of Journalism, Sophia University

Keywords...Democratic watchdog, maeuchi (publishing information held by administrative agencies or the government in advance of other media outlets), unique coverage, producing change in voting behavior, Akita Sakigake Shimpō

#### Journalism's 21st Century Challenge: Elitism, Disengagement and New Sources of Revenue in the Digital Age

Nikki Usher

Associate professor, The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the College of Media's Journalism Department

Keywords...Elite democracy, diverse news media, disengagement with news media, gap in awareness, the New York Times

#### Pursuing a “Digital Shift,” We Are Striving to Become an Integrated Media Corporation That Seeks to Enrich Lives

Shiro Nakamura

President and CEO of The Asahi Shimbun Company

Keywords...Unique digital expression, service journalism, destruction of news market, fact checking, integrated media corporation

#### The Media Must Regain People’s Trust Through Investigative Journalism

Masaru Seo

Director, Smart News Media Research Institute

Keywords...Declining trust in media, gap in awareness, crisis of democracy, investigative journalism, a strong society that is not misled by misinformation, media literacy education

## About This Issue

### News Media at a Turning Point

#### – Creating an Unfragmented Public Sphere and Protecting the Soundness of Democracy



**Masaki Taniguchi**

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Japan is unparalleled as the world's leading newspaper powerhouse. The Yomiuri Shimbun, The Asahi Shimbun, The Mainichi Shimbun, and The Nihon Keizai Shimbun are among the world's top ten newspapers in terms of circulation. However, today there is a shadow over the future of the newspaper. As of October 2020, newspaper circulation in Japan was approximately 35 million, representing a decline of around two-thirds in 20 years. The shift away from newspapers is particularly marked among young people; according to a survey by the Japan Press Research Institute, less than 10% of people in their 30s or below read newspapers every day. Criticism of newspapers on the Internet is severe, irrespective of their specific political orientation.

Based on the case of the United States, in which the harsh environment surrounding newspapers has developed in advance of other nations, there is concern that this trend will go beyond the fate of a particular industry, and will have an adverse effect on democracy. The turmoil of the 2020 presidential election highlighted the dangers of political communication via the Internet: cyber cascades, echo chambers, filter bubbles, fake news, and more. How would ex-President Trump respond to Thomas Jefferson's statement "[...] were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter"?

In this issue of *My Vision*, we asked five experts – two of whom are leaders of the Japanese newspaper industry, and the others of whom possess a deep knowledge of the necessary direction for journalism in Japan and overseas – what it will be necessary to do in order to protect the Japanese news media and maintain the soundness of democracy in the nation.

### What Strategies Should News Media Adopt in the Digital Age?

As pointed out by Susumu Shimoyama, a writer known for works such as *Ni-sen go-juu-nen no media* ("The Media in 2050"), Japanese newspapers, in particular their political reporters, have traditionally found value in establishing relationships with sources such as politicians and civil servants, receiving information from them, and publishing scoops based on this information ahead of their competitors. However, with the development of the Internet, even in cases in which a newspaper is excluded from receiving special information from the government, it can immediately catch up with its competitors via digital editions. As a result, the competition over which outlet has or has not received a scoop from the government or bureaucracy no longer has particular significance for readers. Mr. Shimoyama emphasizes that it is precisely investigative journalism, which reveals behind-the-scenes facts not announced by the government, that will be the path to survival for newspapers.

Masaru Seo, the founding Editor-in-Chief of the Internet news organ Gendai Business, and now the Director of the Smart News Media Research Institute, is also of the opinion that investigative journalism, which reveals concealed information and issues not previously visible to the public, accords with the necessity of restoring confidence in the media and protecting democracy. As Mr. Seo informs us, while the Internet has issues such as fake news, we must not resort to such "drastic solutions" as surveillance and censorship; rather, it will be essential to provide education in media literacy from the stage of compulsory education in order to enable people to compare and examine a variety of media

information and make the correct decisions on that basis.

What is the situation in the United States, which, for better or worse, is one step ahead of Japan with regard to news media strategies for the digital era? According to scholar of communications Nikki Usher, an Associate Professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the author of books including *Making News* at The New York Times and *Interactive Journalism*, while the volume of consumption of media content and the time spent consuming that content are increasing, media are diversifying, and the number of people who do not access news via their social media feeds is also increasing. Professor Usher tells us that in the future, it will be important for news media to utilize digital marketing in order to attract people's attention and to find stable sources of income.

## **Supporting the Mission of Newspaper Journalism by Means of Diversification of the Newspaper Business**

How will the leadership of Japan's two major newspapers, The Yomiuri Shimbun and The Asahi Shimbun, respond to the difficult situation outlined for us by the three contributors discussed above? We can see both similarities and differences in the views of Shoichi Oikawa, Chairman of the Board of The Yomiuri Shimbun Holdings, and Shiro Nakamura, President and CEO of The Asahi Shimbun Company.

The first point that these two executives have in common is a sense of mission: that the role of the news media in accurately conveying the events of the world must not be allowed to disappear and be lost as a deluge of fake news inundates our societies. They display another point of similarity in promoting the diversification of their businesses into such areas as real estate, entertainment, and online and catalogue sales, thus strengthening the management foundations of their respective companies as a means of maintaining the true purpose of journalism.

At the same time, there are very interesting differences between the two companies with regard to digitalization. While The Yomiuri Shimbun draws a line in the sand in relation to a "digital first" prioritization of digital editions, and is focusing resources on encouraging a habit of reading physical newspapers among children with its KODOMO Shimbun ("newspaper for elementary school students") and Chukosei Shimbun ("newspaper for junior high and high school students"), The Asahi Shimbun does not regard the ongoing enhancement of its digital edition as competing with its paper edition, and seeks to cultivate a new readership by means of the digital distribution of a variety of content that will be useful in its readers' daily lives.

## **Infrastructure for Political Communication That Transcends Barriers**

In Japan, the power of national newspapers remains strong, and even if users shift to the Internet as their primary source of information, the number of stakeholders is limited, given that providers such as Yahoo! News and LINE NEWS are more central than Facebook and other social media platforms. The time is coming when we must take advantage of these characteristics and, in order to resist fake news, the common enemy of the news media and democracy, design infrastructure for the public sphere and political communication in a new era, infrastructure that transcends the divisions between different newspaper companies with regard to political outlook, and between old and new media. Reading the recommendations of the five experts in this issue only strengthens this feeling.

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Professor Taniguchi is President of NIRA, and a Professor in The University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Law and Politics. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from The University of Tokyo, and specializes in the study of political science and contemporary Japanese political discourse.

**Expert Opinions**

## **As a Reliable Media Format Offering Breaking News, the Role of Newspapers Will Become Increasingly Important**



### **Shoichi Oikawa**

Representative Director,  
Chairman of the Board and Senior  
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examining them as an organization.

In reality, however, the number of households that do not subscribe to newspapers is increasing, and the management of newspaper companies is, it goes without saying, becoming difficult. Parents are busy with work, and children are spending less time at home due to attendance at cram schools and various other activities. This means that opportunities to be exposed to newspapers have decreased. In order to encourage people to adopt the habit of reading newspapers from childhood and so increase the number of future readers, we have been publishing weekly newspapers The Yomiuri KODOMO Shimbun (newspaper for elementary school students) and The Yomiuri Chukosei Shimbun (newspaper for junior high and high school students) in collaboration with the publishing house Shogakukan. Rather than rewriting a regular newspaper in a simpler fashion, we create everything, from materials to writing, illustrations, and layouts, from scratch, using perspectives based on children's way of thinking. The number of copies of The Yomiuri Shimbun in circulation is continuing to decrease, but there has been no decline in the circulation of the KODOMO Shimbun, in spite of the low birthrate.

We are advancing the digitization of newspapers. The Yomiuri Shimbun was the first to create a system in which the political news and city news editors were alternately assigned to the news network center in order to ensure that the news we were gathering could be reported online as soon as possible. Our digital version also provides content such as "yomiDr." that offer ease of use and detailed commentary, in addition to fulfilling other user needs. However, our concept is not "digital first," in the sense of giving top priority to the digital version in all cases. It is unlikely that digital content alone, in the absence of print newspapers, could allow us to acquire awareness, thinking ability, and culture.

On the other hand, we are also focusing our efforts on our real estate and entertainment businesses to compensate for the decline in income from sources such as advertising, which formerly has provided support for our operations. Our entertainment and event businesses previously sought to promote newspaper sales, but now they generate significant revenue themselves, and in this way we are expanding our management baseoperations. The acquisition of Yomiuri Lland Co., formerly a separate company, and our redevelopment of Tokyo Dome are symbolic of our diversification.

Mr. Oikawa joined The Yomiuri Shimbun in 1964. As a front-line journalist, he covered the upheavals in politics of the time. After serving as Political News Department writer, editorial writer and Political News Department editor, among other posts, he has held key positions such as director and managing editor; representative director and president of The Yomiuri Shimbun Osaka; representative director, president, and executive editor of The Yomiuri Shimbun; director and executive adviser to The Yomiuri Shimbun Holdings, and director and owner of the Yomiuri Giants. He was appointed representative director and chairman of the board in 2019 and is concurrently director and chairman of the Editorial Board of The Yomiuri Shimbun. He is a graduate of Waseda University's Faculty of Political Science and Economics.

Traditional news media, and newspapers in particular, are facing difficulties. The circulation of The Yomiuri Shimbun, which was close to 10 million in 2011, has decreased by more than 2.5 million in 10 years. The spread of the Internet is one of a variety of factors involved in this, but nevertheless, the Internet will not be able to replace newspapers. The role of the newspaper as a news medium that accurately communicates facts regarding the events that take place in the world will not disappear.

Another role of newspapers is the expression of opinions. In March, The Yomiuri Shimbun created a seven-point proposal regarding responses to COVID-19. Individuals can also express their opinions via the Internet, but these are nothing more than individual opinions, and their accuracy is not verified. Newspapers are the only media that can speak out to the government and society after listening to the opinions of the concerned parties from various angles and comprehensively

**Expert Opinions**

## Pursuing a “Digital Shift,” We Are Striving to Become an Integrated Media Corporation That Seeks to Enrich Lives



**Shiro Nakamura**

President and CEO of The Asahi Shimbun Company

became clear to us that we had to refine our use of methods unique to digital expression, such as videos and podcasts.

We have developed a tool called “Hotaru,” which analyzes data including the gender and age ratio of our digital readers, how they arrived at the article, and how many minutes they read it, for each of our digital articles. Using this data, we found, for example, that the majority of users who read Asahi news on the messenger app LINE are women in their thirties and forties. We are seeking modes of distribution that match the characteristics of the dissemination media. As the term "service journalism" implies, taking the perspective of our users into consideration, we are trying to digitally disseminate a variety of content that is useful in daily life, from pets to inheritance issues.

On the other hand, in the digital space, news that has been covered by mass media outlets possessing experience and a proven track record coexists with articles cobbled together from information gathered from other media and fake news, which involve little to no actual research. I am concerned that this might represent the destruction of the news market. The major role of journalism is not only to provide accurate information, but also to monitor those in power, uncover facts, as for example in the scoop related to the falsification of Ministry of Finance documents, and offer a diverse expression of opinion. These values will not change, and fact checking is also becoming an important role.

Reliable information is not available for free. It takes a considerable amount of manpower and expense to deliver accurate information. A stable management base is essential to making this a company’s main business. Paradoxically, in order to protect journalism, it will be necessary to streamline the costs of the traditional newspaper business such as printing, sales, and delivery, and to reduce their relative share of the total. Rather than relying on a single huge tree called the newspaper industry, we are striving to become an integrated media corporation that seeks to enrich lives. I want us to nurture other trees such as events, real estate, education, online and catalogue sales, and intellectual property, growing leaves and branches until our business is like a forest that produces sufficient fruit.

Mr. Nakamura joined The Asahi Shimbun Company in 1986. Following terms as a reporter in the company's Political News Section and Chinese General Bureau, Foreign News Editor, Director of the Advertising Department, first Public Editor, Executive Officer responsible for Editing, and General Manager and Director of the Editorial Department of the Tokyo headquarters, he became Executive Vice-President in 2020. While he was Executive Vice-President, he oversaw digital policy and vertical media business, supervising the company's overall content business. Mr. Nakamura became President and CEO (his current position) in April 2021, and oversaw the commencement of a new medium-term management plan going into effect from April that seeks to build brand value for the digital age that is unique to Asahi. He is a graduate of The University of Tokyo.

**Expert Opinions**

## **Competing for the Information the Government Officials Are Willing to Give Is Not “Journalism”**



**Susumu Shimoyama**

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prefectural office and report on matters announced by those organizations' public relations offices, visiting the homes of police officers, prefectural officials and public prosecutors in the early morning and late at night, building relationships and gathering information.

Even if these reporters return to Tokyo, they will continue to engage with central government agencies, the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, and special investigative teams from the Tokyo District Public Prosecutor's Office.

The publication of information held by administrative agencies or the government in advance of other newspapers is termed "maeuchi" in Japan.

This "maeuchi" information may have had a certain value in the newspaper era, but when platformers such as Yahoo! News are flooded with free news, even if one newspaper gets information faster than others, the others will soon catch up. Information is being commoditized.

Even if traditional newspapers continue to publish such information, people will not pay a monthly fee of 4,000 yen to read it. This is why the circulation of newspapers has nose dived.

In the past several years, scoops that have shaken national politics, such as the suspicions related to former Prime Minister Abe's cherry blossom viewing parties or the issue of buying expensive dinner and drink of officials of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications by the company who has interest on their jurisdiction, have been made by such outlets as Shimbun Akahata or Shukan Bunshun, which are not members of press clubs of the type mentioned above.

However, we can find some exceptions even among Japanese newspapers. The Akita Sakigake Shimpō, a regional newspaper in northern Japan, played the role of watchdog when it exposed manipulation of data by the Ministry of Defense in its survey of suitable sites for the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense Base. The Akita Sakigake Shimpō revealed that the Ministry of Defense's survey was based on predetermined conclusions. This changed people's voting behavior and resulted in the cancellation of the Aegis deployment itself.

I believe that coverage of this type, which can only be performed by reporters conducting independent investigations, can allow newspapers to survive and help to revitalize democracy.

Mr. Shimoyama has vividly delineated the structural changes and vicissitudes of the media industry based on detailed research, and has offered a vision of what the media should be. From 2018, as an Invited Guest Professor of Keio University's Faculty of Policy Management, he commenced a survey-based course on the theme of "the media in 2050." The results of the surveys conducted in this course were presented the following year in Ni-sen go-juu-nen no media ("The Media in 2050"), published by Bungei Shunju. Mr. Shimoyama completed the International Journalism program at Columbia Journalism School in 1993. He is the author of a regular column concerning the media for the Sunday Mainichi news magazine.

In the United States, we are seeing a waning of democracy in the midst of an expansion of "news deserts."

Is the same thing happening in Japan? Certainly, the total circulation of Japanese newspapers, which was 53.7 million in 2000, had dropped to 35.91 million in 2020.

US newspapers have played a role as watchdogs since the New York Times and the Washington Post exposed the Pentagon Papers even though the U.S. government litigated the articles not to be published. However, there is significant doubt as to whether Japanese newspapers have played a role of this type.

In the case of Japanese newspapers, the first thing that new reporters assigned to local bureaus are required to do is to affiliate with the press clubs of the prefectural police and the

**Expert Opinions**

# The Media Must Regain People's Trust Through Investigative Journalism



**Masaru Seo**

Director, Smart News  
Media Research Institute

The greatest problem facing newspapers and other news media is the fact that the public's trust in the media is declining. While this is a global phenomenon, a survey conducted by the Reuters Institute indicates that there is a serious perception gap between the media and the public in Japan in particular. The media views themselves as watchdogs monitoring those in power, but the public sees the media as a vested interest group. The lack of awareness of Japan's media in relation to this gap in perception is driving a loss of public trust. If trust in the media continues to decline and news media no longer function as a conduit of accurate information, we face the possibility of confusion in the public sphere due to the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories. The divisions created in the United States under the Trump administration offer us one example.

If citizens are unable to make appropriate decisions based on reliable information, we are inviting a crisis in the democratic order.

What value can the news media contribute to a democratic society? This is a question that the media needs, precisely now, to ask itself again. Today anyone can communicate with the broader social sphere via the Internet; this means that it is no longer necessary for the media to be fixated on breaking news. Investigative journalism, which spends time to uncover hidden facts and problems that have previously been buried, and which brings new issues to people's attention, is an important value that the media is able to contribute in support of democracy. However, the media business model is now being forced to change, making it difficult to maintain former mechanisms allowing investigative journalism. We have therefore established a subsidiary called "Slow News," which provides support to investigative journalism. We believe that the first step is to foster journalists with specialized knowledge, and create an environment in which those journalists are able to write articles based on their own investigations and the data that they gather.

A range of problems are being pointed out in relation to Internet media, making it important to improve the ways in which we disseminate news; this would include fact checking as a preventive measure against fake news and the creation of mechanisms for the distribution of reliable information. That said, we should not resort to drastic solutions such as government surveillance and censorship. The free space represented by the Internet, in which a variety of opinions can coexist and every individual is able to state their views, has fostered diversity and brought about technological and social progress. Unfounded rumors and false news existed before the development of the Internet, and it will be impossible to eradicate them. Our goal should be to build a strong society in which people are not fooled by hoaxes. To that end, it will also be necessary to conduct media literacy education from the stage of compulsory education to ensure that everyone can compare and examine the information that they receive in order to make the correct decisions. In an era in which everyone has become a transmitter of information, it will be essential for the media and educational institutions to accept their social responsibility and make efforts to comprehensively change the environment surrounding the transmission of news and information.

Following a period of employment at Nikkei McGraw-Hill, Inc. (now Nikkei BP), Mr. Seo joined the Kodansha publishing house, where he oversaw the publication of the Weekly Gendai and the Monthly Gendai, before becoming the Editor-in-Chief of Gendai Business. He joined Smart News in 2018, and was later appointed to the position of Director of the Smart News Media Research Institute, in which role he conducts research on challenges facing society and the media and makes relevant recommendations. In 2019 he established a subsidiary of Smart News called Slow News Co., Ltd., with the aim of supporting investigative journalism, and he serves as the company's President and Representative Director. Mr. Seo is the Director of the Japan Internet Media Association, and a member of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications' Broadcasting Issues Study Group. He draws on a diverse range of experience in the media industry to foster and support journalism in a new era. Mr. Seo is a graduate of Doshisha University.

**Expert Opinions**

## **Journalism's 21st Century Challenge: Elitism, Disengagement and New Sources of Revenue in the Digital Age**



**Nikki Usher**

Associate professor, The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the College of Media's Journalism Department

politics or social issues, many now actively avoid news to shield themselves and their family from murder, COVID-19, and other unpleasantness. Compounding this, is the general decline in newspaper subscriptions, and businesses, including Starbucks no longer selling newspapers. That, along with the increasing digitalization of news media, has led to a particularly pronounced disengagement amongst people of lower socioeconomic status, who now encounter less news while going about their daily lives, and whose social media networks are thus less likely to actively engage with the news.

Nonetheless, an opportunity exists in the ever-increasing consumption of and time spent on digital media content. However, people's content consumption patterns are also diversifying and thus their attention is becoming more fragmented. As a result, news organizations need to think carefully about how to use the increasingly fleeting moments in which they are able to fully command their audience's attention. Journalists must ask themselves how they can best present information to both hold their audience's interest and allow them to learn something.

However, a major hurdle exists in that many journalists misunderstand their relationship with their audience. There is a large gap between those journalists who feel called to "educate the masses," and the kind of content their audience actually wants to see. Whether this gap can be bridged, and people's opinion of the news media improved depends on the news media's effective use of digital marketing to realign news content and audience desires.

In this regard, The New York Times is at the forefront, having undergone a successful digital transformation. The difficult lesson for other institutions is that technological adaptation takes time and is not as simple as merely creating a department to oversee it. Even in the case of the New York Times, it took ten years to become a truly digital native institution. The key is learning how to profit within the digital marketplace, identifying and securing stable sources of income. From that perspective, the exclusive control over the profits of digital advertising held by Internet platformers is undoubtedly a major problem for the future of journalism.

Dr. Nikki Usher specializes in media sociology and political communication. Her publication *Making News* at The New York Times (University of Michigan Press, 2014), which looked at the response of the New York Times to digitalization, won the Tankard Book Award. Dr. Usher's other publications include *Interactive Journalism: Hackers, Data, and Code* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), which focuses on the rise of programming and data journalism in the media. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Prior to taking up her current position, she was an Associate Professor in George Washington University's School of Media & Public Affairs. Her new book, *News for the Rich, White, and Blue: What the Decline of Journalism Means for America*, which served as the background for this interview, will be published by Columbia University Press in June of this year.