"Legitimation Crisis" of Journalism in Japan

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Introduction

This paper considers how changes in media environment and political culture have affected journalism in Japan in recent years. The "crisis" of news media and journalism has recently become a hot topic of discussion at the global level, with events like the populism and media politics of the Trump regime in the US, Brexit in the UK, and the rise of far-right politics in the EU. It is said that "populism," "fake news" and a "post-truth" environment have undermined the legitimacy of journalism. In Japan, the debate over the "crisis" of journalism has also become active, but with somewhat different features to other countries. In Japan, there is no populist political leader who utilizes social media in a way comparable to President Trump; and no nationalist or racist political parties have gained a seat in the National Diet as has happened in several European countries. Then what kind of media "crisis" is developing in Japan?

From the perspective of international comparison, Kaori Hayashi has pointed out that "silent distrust of the media" is developing in Japan (Hayashi, 2017: 161)[†]. In Japan, traditional mainstream media such as newspapers and television retain a significant presence compared to many developed nations, and alternative or grassroots journalism has little influence. However, according to Hayashi, there is an apathy toward journalism among the general public, who are insufficiently concerned about the decline of news media and problems of journalism. Under this situation, the mainstream news media has been shrinking, subject to market fundamentalism. Hayashi finds a "crisis" of Japanese news media and democracy in that the legitimacy of journalism is being unknowingly undermined (Hayashi, 2017: 140).

Hayashi says that the cause of this "crisis" is that the mainstream news media has not appropriately included the voices of citizens (Hayashi, 2017: 216). Therefore, she insists, it is important to enable healthy media participation by citizens.

However, although Hayashi rightly points out the particular characteristics of

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† Hayashi compared data on "media distrust" among U.S.A., U.K., Germany and Japan.

the "crisis" of journalism in Japan, there are some problems with her explanation of it. First, how can we distinguish between "healthy" and "unhealthy" media participation? Hayashi acknowledges that right-wing political tendencies are also active in Japan, and sometimes attack the liberal news media. Can these activities be distinguished from criticism of the mainstream news media by the anti-nuclear movement which has been mainly developed by "liberal" forces? Second, she cannot explain why there is at the same time broad indifference to and intense criticism of journalism. The third problem is the thinness of her explanation of the relationship between journalism and political culture, even though the distrust of the media system and emergence of media populism are inherently related to political culture and democracy. In order to answer these problems, it is necessary to consider the characteristics of Japanese political culture and its relationship to Japanese news culture.

This paper outlines the characteristics of the "crisis" of journalism in contemporary Japanese society from the perspective of political culture. It focuses on the following two points. First, media populism existed already in Japanese politics in the early 2000s, within the mainstream news media. Second, there was a "critical event" which affected both journalism and political culture; the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 raised distrust of the mainstream media and stimulated political activism. The development and diffusion of social media have promoted these tendencies.

Thus, I will argue, changes in these political cultures and changes in the media environment are the two main factors in the crisis of journalism, which is also a crisis of democracy, in Japan. This paper clarifies its phases and elucidates it with the application of theoretical concepts.

The Mainstream News Media and Political Culture in Japan

Hegemony of the Mainstream News Media

In order to properly understand Japanese news culture, it is useful first to focus on the configuration of the mainstream news media in Japanese society. As is well known, in the Japanese news culture, a particular set of national media have played a central role. These national media consist of five national newspapers; five private TV news networks (NNN, ANN, JNN, TXN, and FNN); a public service broadcaster, NHK; and two news agencies. This configuration has been basically maintained even with the transition to a digital landscape.

The mainstream news media have institutionalized a large, nationwide news-gathering system called the "*kisha* club."[‡] This system enables efficient news

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‡   According to the Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association, "the *kisha* club is a voluntary institution for news-gathering and news-reporting activities made up of journalists who regularly collect news from public institutions and other sources." https://www.pressnet.or.jp/english/about/guideline/.

production and functions as an education system for professional journalists, but it also homogenizes the content of the news.

The core of this news culture is the five national newspapers: the *Asahi Shimbun*, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *Mainichi Shimbun*, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (the *Nikkei*) and the *Sankei Shimbun*. These newspapers each sell millions of copies, and each have strong relations with one of the five private broadcasting news networks.[§]

The important point to understand about the national newspapers is the political function that they have played. This is the production of a consensus in postwar Japanese society. The five national newspapers are divided into a conservative camp (the *Yomiuri*, the *Nikkei*, and the *Sankei*) and a liberal camp (the *Asahi* and the *Mainichi*). Despite these ideological differences, a consensus formed between the camps of the two sides after the war on the priority of economic growth and the building of a peaceful nation. These "economy" and "peace" were seen as symbols of national goals, "stabilizers" of society that all members of society should aspire to. Postwar society placed a strong emphasis on consensus and on avoiding polarizing public opinion. Thus, the news-gathering system emerged to produce uniform news content. In other words, consensus has influenced news values and has been reproduced through the daily news production and consumption processes.

Consensus on economic growth and the peaceful nation was established during the late 1950s and early 1960s. It was linked with the establishment of the "1955 system," an understanding between the conservative Liberal Democratic Party and the progressive Japanese Socialist Party. National newspapers and the NHK had supported this system though the news (Krauss, 2000). People increasingly shared a common image and "grand narrative" of society through consumption of news produced by the national news media (Oishi, 2014). Media theorist Nick Couldry named this mechanism "the myth of the mediated center" (Couldry, 2012). In his reading, "social reality" can be shared at the national level if people access the same center constructed by the national media; the smaller the number of "centers," the higher the degree of shared "reality."

The "Lost 20 Years" and Neoliberal Populism

This consensus changed significantly during the so-called "Lost 20 Years," beginning in the 1990s. In the first half of the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Japanese bubble economy, and the end of the "1955 system," Japanese politics, society, and economy of Japan entered a long stagnation.

The "Lost 20 Years" has greatly changed the political culture in Japan. The symbol of political culture during this period has been "reform." It has led to the

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[§] The *Yomiuri* with NNN, the *Asahi* with ANN, the *Mainichi* with JNN, the *Nikkei* with TXN, and the *Sankei* with FNN.

emergence of the following discourse. First, the cause of stagnation lies in the integrated Japanese system of politics, economics, and society, and so it is necessary to change all of them. Second, to do so, it is important to accept global standards and promote the market principle.

The important point for our purposes is that this "reform" was signified in a populist way. As is well known, populism develops according to the following discursive strategy. First, it presents an image of a society divided into two forces. Second, one force is positioned as "good" and the other as "evil." The "evil" side are blamed for causing social and political problems. Third, it presents a "poetic justice" story, which is about rewarding the "good," in this case, the populist leaders and ordinary people, and punishing the "evil," or those opposed to them. By presenting such a narrative, the populist tries to mobilize people who are dissatisfied with the current situation.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (LDP) conducted neoliberal reform according to a populist discursive strategy. The Koizumi government (2001-2006) put forward the slogan "structural reform without sanctuary" and promoted neoliberal policies such as privatization of public sectors and deregulation.

The political style of Prime Minister Koizumi has been called "theatrical politics." Its characteristics are as follows. First, a populist posits him- or herself as a reformer who can carry out difficult tasks with the support of the general public. Second, this populist characterizes oppositional groups as "resistance forces." Third, such a politics is presented as a "poetic justice" story (Otake, 2006). The interesting point is that not only opposition parties and bureaucrats but also LDP politicians themselves who are ostensibly comrades are included in the resistance forces. Prime Minister Koizumi is the leader of the LDP, but also claimed to be prepared to "destroy the LDP" when he became prime minister.

The mainstream media such as newspapers and TV provided the "theaters" for this theatrical politics. Newspapers played the role of disseminating the logic of neoliberal reform to society, while television provided a stage for theatrical politics. The Koizumi government gained a high support rate and remained in power for five years—an unusually long time in Japanese politics. The important points here are, first, that this neoliberal reform frame became a new basic consensus between liberal and conservative media; and second, that the logic of attacking "enemies" based on a good-and-evil dualism and a poetic justice story was produced and reproduced by the mainstream news media, developing into a "logic of antagonism."

The Changes in the Media Environment and "3.11"

Digital Media Environment and News Culture

The mainstream news media has been key to the construction of the discourse on neoliberal "reform," as noted. It (re)articulated with populist discursive strategies and produced the logic of antagonism. This logic has become the dominant code of political culture today, in Japan as so many other places, and the mainstream media not only cannot solve the conflicts caused by this logic, but also comes to be regarded as an "enemy" itself by this logic. This undermines the legitimacy of the mainstream news media. These difficulties are the foundation of the "crisis" of journalism in Japan today.

The cause of this situation is two trends in the past 10 years. The first is certain major changes in the media environment with the emergence of online social media, and the second is the change in the political culture after the earthquake and tsunami on "3.11" and the subsequent nuclear disaster.

In Japan, social media have developed and spread in the past ten years. YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Line are used by many people. Meanwhile, newspaper circulation has been decreasing since about 2000 (though still high in international context); and though television is still watched by elderly people, among people in their 40s and younger, its presence has declined (Kimura, Sekine, & Namiki, 2015).

Nonetheless, the mainstream news media still plays a central role in the production of news. Powerful citizen journalism does not exist in Japan. In 2006, the Korean civic news media organization *OhmyNews* established a Japanese version, but it soon withdrew from the Japanese market. The *Huffington Post* and Buzzfeed are also deployed in Japan, but their presence is low.

Noteworthy is the change in consumption of news. According to a survey by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2018: 131), consumption of newspapers declined sharply from 2013 to 2018 (63%→37% of the total national population).[**] The consumption of news via television is also slightly reduced (69%→65%), while consumption of news by social media has increased slightly (17%→21%). Overall online news consumption is 59%, and news-aggregator-based consumption is larger than in other countries (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018: 15). Also, compared with other countries, active usage, such as commenting and sharing news, is at the lowest level (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016: 101). It can be said that Japanese news consumption is very passive.

These data show that in Japan, though news outlets have multiplied, online news is consumed in the same (passive) style as TV and newspaper news. The

[**]   Weekly usage.

emergence of "mediated centers," which also means pluralized centers, brings about a relative decline in the presence of newspapers and television, as Japanese audience have low loyalty to particular news media (Hayashi, 2017), and do not discriminate between "news" which is produced by the professional news media and "information" which is disseminated by social media: Yahoo! News and Line News are seen as equivalent to news items on the NHK and the *Asahi Shimbun*.

Social Media and Political Culture After 3.11

In 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident occurred, with a huge impact on Japanese society. As a result, a largescale change in social discourse and political culture "post-3.11" or "post-disaster" emerged (Samuels, 2013).

First, let us consider political activism. For a long time, it has been said that Japanese citizens are passive and do not participate social movements or other kind of protests (Gonoi, 2012). However, as a result of the Fukushima disaster, an anti-nuclear movement came to be generated, as people took action in various forms, such as a rally of 200,000 people and regular demonstrations in front of the prime minister's office. With time, the anti-nuclear movement became more latent, but a new culture of activism had become established. After the anti-nuclear movement, large-scale protests on other, sometimes longstanding, social and political issues occurred, such as an opposition movement against the national-security-related bills of 2015. Also, in Okinawa, activism opposing the US military bases has been intensified. The increase in activism has also benefited right-wing forces in the form of a vitalized racist movement. Social media plays a major role in driving these activities.

Although this social-media-driven activism has greatly invigorated changed Japanese political culture, at the same time, this activism intensifies conflicts and divisions in society. Consensus is becoming lost in Japanese political culture, and antagonisms are growing. The fact that the second Abe government of the LDP, established in 2012, is promoting authoritarian and conservative policies is also a factor intensifying conflicts and divisions in Japanese political society. Social media tends to promote rather than resolve such antagonisms.

Aside from activism has been the major change in political communication with the diffusion of social media in the present decade. As noted above, social media tends in Japan to be used much like mass media, rather than interactively. In other words, the stage of theatrical politics has expanded to social media.

The logic of antagonism is also increasingly prevalent. In 2009 and 2010, the government of the Democratic Party of Japan organized a "Government Revitalization Unit." This was a "theater" where politicians and business elites criticized the wastefulness of bureaucrats based on "market principles," publicly through streaming on the Internet. Politicians came more and more to use Twitter

and Facebook actively after 3.11. The Twitter account of Toru Hashimoto, who was a leader of the Japan Restoration Party and a radical neoliberal "reformist" politician, had more than one million followers. He wrote tweets attacking bureaucrats and other politicians with an antagonistic tone. A series of cases like this means that the logic of antagonism created by the mainstream news media has taken root in social media.

The Legitimation Crisis of the Mainstream News Media

The mainstream news media became a focus of severe criticism in this changing media environment and political culture over the past decade. Due to changes in the media environment, the mainstream news media is no longer the exclusive "center," as discussed. And they have begun to be attacked under the logic of antagonism they created themselves.

The Fukushima incident led to great criticism of the coverage by the mainstream news media, as noted. Early in the unfolding accident, the mainstream media gave reports that depended heavily on information provided by the government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), responsible for the site. As a result, the news they produced was homogenous and non-critical. Criticism was directed to the news production system and in particular the *kisha* club[††]. Critics argued that the mainstream media had been manipulated by the information strategy of TEPCO and the government, who were trying to conceal the real impact of the nuclear accident. They also criticized the mainstream media for supporting Japanese nuclear policy until the accident. Critics cast the liberal newspapers in particular as members of the inner circle of nuclear policy promotors, along with politicians, bureaucrats, companies, and scholars. On the other hand, the presence and alternative journalistic activities of social media right after the accident were highly appreciated. Scientists and activists critical of nuclear energy policy posted their own opinions and information through social media. A frame of "social media versus the mainstream media," in which the former was "good" and the latter "evil," emerged.

A similar frame is also visible in political communication, for example in the controversy between Toru Hashimoto and the mainstream news media, especially the *Asahi*. When he was the Mayor of Osaka, Hashimoto announced that he would refuse any interview from the mainstream news media in the future[‡‡]. Instead, he repeatedly posted his ideas on Twitter. He claimed that his comments on the "comfort women" issue were distorted and taken out of context by the "biased" mainstream news media. Twitter, on the other hand, let him communicate clearly

[††] For example, "The sin of 'Imperial Headquarter Announcements' by the mass media" in *Blogos*, August 17, 2011. Retrieved from https://blogos.com/article/23760/.

[‡‡] *The Asahi Shimbun*, May 19, 2013.

and directly to the public. Many people accepted Hashimoto's frame and supported him. In this new style of political communication, politicians attack the mainstream media through social media, in a new "poetic justice" story.

Under these circumstances, the "*Asahi* problem" occurred in 2014. The *Asahi Shimbun* was the quintessential liberal newspaper in Japan, and as such a symbolic "enemy" that was strongly attacked by right-wing politicians and social media. The problem was triggered by misinformation printed in the *Asahi* (September 12, 2014) on the comfort women and Fukushima issues, and clearly shows the transformation of the mainstream media. First, the *Asahi*, as representative of the mainstream news media was attacked by other mainstream media. National newspapers were divided into two camps over the nuclear policy and the history issues, and the loss of consensus brought social polarization. Second, not only the *Asahi* but also other national newspapers saw major declines in copies sold after this scandal. In other words, the legitimacy of the mainstream news media itself is decreasing in Japanese society.

A similar symbolic event was the misinformation problem at the *Sankei Shimbun* in 2017. The *Sankei* is a very conservative paper and a strong supporter of the Abe government. The *Sankei* reported on a traffic accident in Okinawa in 2017 (*Sankei News* (web), December 9, 2017 and the *Sankei Shimbun*, December 12, 2017), one of whose victims was a U.S. Marine. The *Sankei Shimbun* reported that he rescued other victims, and criticized local media in Okinawa for not reporting such good stories about US soldiers.[§§] However, it was fake news. *The Sankei* had created a news story influenced by information on social media, and had not confirmed it with basic news sources such as Okinawa Prefectural Police (*Sankei Shimbun*, February 8, 2018). In this way, this mainstream media outlet fed rather than defused the antagonistic discourse around the U.S. base issue, and the professionalism of news production was undermined.

Antagonisms and Voices

The discussion of various aspects of Japanese political and media culture above should have made the nature of the "crisis" of journalism in Japan clear. A "silent distrust of the media" has emerged, interrelated with antagonisms in political culture; and the news culture institutionalized by the mainstream news media cannot respond appropriately to these antagonisms, because the mainstream news media, which itself built the logic of antagonism in an earlier period, and has now become embroiled in and targeted by it as the media environment has changed.

How to construct a news culture that dissolves these problems is an important task. In Japan, the mainstream news media have to be the ones to do it, because a

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[§§]   *The Sankei* is in favor of the government's base policy. Local papers are against it.

professional news culture is not yet established on the Internet, as noted, and social media itself is built on the mechanisms of the antagonisms.

So how does one rebuild a news culture? This paper refers to political theory and social theory on antagonisms in political culture to make some suggestions.

The criticism of neoliberalism and the concept of "voice" by Nick Couldry are suggestive. Couldry considers the "voice" to be a "process": "the process of giving an account of one's life and its conditions"; he says that "to give such an account means telling a story, providing a narrative" (Couldry, 2010: 7). At the same time, "voice" as a process entails mutual communication: to speak to others, to listen to the voice of others, and to share "the world" through this process.

Couldry criticizes neoliberalism for undermining the values that enable "voice" as a process. As a result of neoliberalism, which has become the disciplining principle of everyday life, a culture of "non-listening" has formed.

Couldry's criticism of neoliberalism is useful in analyzing the crisis of journalism in Japan. First, it should be possible to clarify how Japanese mainstream news media since the 1990s has undermined the value of "voice"; and second, it presents a norm based on which the "crisis" of the mainstream news media today can perhaps be overcome.

The crucial point is to link the concept of "voice" with news culture and let the former illuminate our understanding of the latter. In the practice of journalism, it is important to consider whose voice should be listened to in the news-gathering process and how to best articulate and balance multiple voices in the editing process. Reconsidering the news culture in terms of "voice," will help us reclaim the legitimacy of journalism in the contemporary media environment.

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