

2006

Japan and the U.S.: Two Free Nations, Two Versions of Free Press

Eliza Koch
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur>



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Koch, Eliza (2006) "Japan and the U.S.: Two Free Nations, Two Versions of Free Press," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 6, Article 12.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56816/2378-6949.1119>

Available at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol6/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato by an authorized editor of Cornerstone: A Collection of Scholarly and Creative Works for Minnesota State University, Mankato.

JAPAN AND THE U.S.: TWO FREE NATIONS, TWO VERSIONS OF FREE PRESS

Eliza Koch (Mass Communications)

Eiji Kawabata, Faculty Mentor (Political Science)

The media are important in a democracy; they provide a means of communication between the government and its constituents. They also serve as a fourth branch to check the country's government. Although these two nations have different histories there are many similarities in the media systems. This presentation examines the media and politics in two separate democratic nations, Japan and the United States. Despite their different historical and cultural backgrounds, they have similarities. Both nations have free press, but there are cases when both governmental systems have attempted to censor their media in one form or another. This presentation delves into the differences as well, for instance the Japanese system is more exclusive than the United States'. While analyzing the similar and diverse aspects of the media systems the presentation touches on the benefits and the disadvantages of both systems. Through these analyses, the presentation illuminates the fundamental relationship between the media and democracy.

One may assume, because Japan and the United States are different nations in many respects, their media systems would be completely opposite. There are differences due to various public expectations and political histories the media. However, while the nations' media have differences there are similarities as well, implying that ultimately freedom of the press will cause similarities in otherwise diverse media. Self-censoring media in both nations tends to censor itself in similar ways. This can be explained by examining the role of media in the political realm and by analyzing the histories of the two separate nations. While analyzing the histories of these nations one will notice that two separate actors played major roles in the formation of their political systems. In Japan the political system was formed by government leaders while in the U.S. system has developed due to the public's influence. These different actors also came to be the major actors in influencing the public expectations of the media causing some differences to arise. Noting the differences in histories, political systems, and public expectations causes the similarities to suggest that a democratic free press will generate similar media.

Media as a Government Actor

In the United States the media are often called the fourth branch of government. The reason for this is two fold. The media serve as a check on the government, not only the different branches themselves, but the individuals within those branches. The media also serve as the main method of communication between the government and its constituents.

The judicial, legislative, and executive branches operate as a check on each other. The media are the "watchdog" of the government. If the media were not allowed the freedom to report on the government and its officials the public would be unaware of the actions taken by the people representing them. The media often set the agenda for many of the major changes that take place in the government. In the United States for example the media played a large role in furthering the civil rights movement. Not only did news coverage make the country aware of the movement but the government ads did as well. The media served to expose some of the injustices that would have been hidden from the public. People in the North who were away from the center of the controversy were particularly unaware of the Southern cruelties (Pember, 2005).

In countries where the government goes unchecked by the media, many atrocities go unreported and unchanged. For instance, repressive Nazi Germany prevented the media from printing anything that criticized the government. This allowed Hitler to control the entire nation without question from many of its citizens. Hitler's tyrannical rule when unchecked was disastrous; not for Germany alone but for the world. While, WWII may not have been prevented by a free press, perhaps Hitler would not have gained as much power if he had been exposed earlier by the media (Lang, 2005). The events of 1989 in China were not reported accurately by the Chinese media. The Trade and Development Report addressed China's government as "secret politics" and analyzed the events that followed the Tiananmen Square massacre. The Chinese government did everything in its power to cover up the incident. The little media coverage in China after

the massacre portrayed the events as a victory for China. This silenced the radical revolutionists and continued to allow China to appear to be a strong nation.

The government utilizes the media for its own purposes as well. Political candidates could not present their side of an issue without the media. Politicians are given the opportunity through ads, debates, and news stories to present their image to the public. The government itself utilizes the media to communicate to the people it is serving. The state of the union address is one of the ways media are used to provide constituents with information necessary to understand the workings of the government. The government also uses the media to create support for actions that affect the entire nation. Press conferences are given to explain actions taken by the government. Advertisements are used to gain support for certain measures taken by the government. For instance, during times of war ads often run that call for public support of the government.

Political Histories

As with every political system Japan's government was developed over a number of centuries. China contributed to Japan's system of beliefs early in its history. Spain and Portugal sent Christian missionaries to the country during the 15th Century. In the 17th to mid-nineteenth century Japan went through a period of isolation. During this period the missionaries were removed and no outside influence penetrated the Japanese culture. This isolationism left Japan behind the rest of the world. In order to bring the country into the present day the Meiji Restoration began in 1868. During the restoration the government took actions to modernize Japan. It was a revolution of sorts, but the change was instigated by government officials. Parliament was established during the restoration. The country continued to change during WWI. By the end of the war the influence of the elders on parliament had declined (Stockwin, 1999).

In the years after the war many changes took place. The Japanese government set up a puppet state in Manchuria. The country went through a period of political assassinations and attempted coups. The world was going through a depression which affected Japan as well causing a strongly conservative right-wing to emerge. The international policy became one of economic protectionism. The ideology promoted was one of "tenno-worship" which meant a strong respect for the authorities. In the early to mid-1930s there was a dual government in place. The civilian and military establishments pursued "uncoordinated thought (Stockwin, 1999)."

Japanese social norms have affected the development of politics over the years. The society has a history of being based on hierarchies as well as being very group oriented. The Japanese demand an extreme amount of respect for their elders and the head of the household. This history leads the Japanese people to have a strong loyalty towards their leaders (Stockwin, 1999).

While the Japanese political system is based on the state, the United States political system is more based on individuals. The changes brought forth in the Japanese political system were instigated by the government itself. The changes in the United States were often instigated by the people of the nation. The nation itself was built on the people rebelling against their current government, the "U.S. was born in a war that rejected the organizational qualities of the state (Skowronek, 1982)." The country, because of this, has a "sense of statelessness in [its] political culture (Skowronek, 1982)."

Jeffersonian America rejected the idea of the class system whereas Japan has a history of embracing hierarchies. When the equality of men was threatened, the citizens of the United States took action to prevent classes from taking over. In early America, industrialization began to suppress the working class. Factory workers were underpaid and overworked. This spurred the emergence of unions (Dodd, 1994). After years of slavery the nation realized the immorality of the institution and took actions to outlaw it. When women were being suppressed and were not allowed to vote, society took action to gain suffrage for women. The civil rights movement stemmed from citizens taking the initiative to change the laws and changed the behavior of almost an entire nation.

The United State's history is peppered changes that were driven by its citizens. More Americans vote than in any other democracy in the world according to Fiorina and Peterson (1998). The United States also has a predominantly two-party system that has been in place for years. In Japan's government multiple parties exist in theory but one has had majority rule for the past 50 years. The two main parties in the United States have been in and out of power for as long as parties have existed.

Media History

Japanese media also have naturally evolved over the years along with its political system. The first news agencies, which distributed news to various Japanese press, were founded in 1890. In 1926 two major news agencies merged to form the Nippon Dengo News Agency which was a non-profit cooperation like America's Associated Press. The Dengo agency's rival was formed in 1901 it was a commercial agency. In 1936 the two rival agencies formed the Domei News Agency. This agency's reputation was questioned after its role in spreading anti-United States propaganda during WWII. This poor reputation caused the agency to dissolve in 1945 creating two news wire services. The Kyodo Tsushin would play the role of the non-profit cooperation while the Jiji Tsushin would be a profit driven agency covering the economic news. Jiji established an overseas service in 1951. In 1952, three big national dailies developed their own news gathering systems but all three re-subscribed in 1957. In 1975 Kyodo computerized public business and non-media information. In 1975 the two agencies signed an agreement to help each other in the event of a disaster. These agencies provide news to the Japanese press (Copper-Chen 1997). Various changes occurred in other areas of Japanese media but much of the media system seems to be driven by the press.

The United States media have also developed over time. The first American newspaper, "Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick," was first published in 1690; nine days after its first publication the governor and council put an end to the paper. The first daily in the United States was published by Benjamin Towne in 1783. In the years to come between 1801 and 1833 journalism expanded more than six times as many newspapers were in print by the end of this period. The Penny paper, which thrived between 1833 and 1860, brought "a new economic level of people to the news paper audience (Mott 1962 p. 215)." Political newspapers were also prevalent during this period. During the Civil War journalists became war correspondents. During the 1860's the papers became more independent. Political parties no longer had control over the media. The media struggled along with the nation during WWI, WWII, and the Great Depression. During this time there were many large consolidations of newspapers. By the 1950's and 60's newspapers, magazines, television, and radio were coming together to reach mass audiences they had not been able to reach before (Mott 1962). Now with

the advent of the internet and more advanced technology the media is constantly changing and reaching larger amounts of people as well as covering news in more areas of the world.

Public Expectations of Nations' Media

Public opinion in Japan reflects its history as well. Japanese newspapers have some of the highest readership numbers in the world. The public not only turns to its media daily to inform them of the happenings in their nation but it also trusts the media to give them the truth more than any other national media. Gamble (2004) found that 88% of the Japan's nearly 100% literate citizens trust completely in their paper. Of American citizens only 20% trust their papers (p. 34). This blind trust may be one of the main reasons that the media cartels and the government can get away with their lack of investigative journalism and their withholding of information. Many of the Japanese citizens are oblivious to the inner workings of the press clubs and what it means for their access to information (Gamble, 2004). The individual nature of the United States' political system causes its citizens to question its government. Americans seem to understand the importance of being informed and demand that the government allows them that access. James Madison stated that, "knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives (Pember, 2005 p. 324)." It is this principle that drives the American people to be critical of their government and not to simply trust everything the government tells them. Both left and right thinkers are critical of the media seeing that it is slanted from one side or the other.

Differences Between the Nations' Media

The different histories of their political systems as well as the differences in the public expectations of the media bring forth differences in the media. These differences are apparent in a various areas of the media.

One of the major characteristics of Japanese media is exclusivity. Only the media clubs have direct access to information provided not only by government officials but large businesses as well. If a journalist does not belong to one of these elite clubs the "people's right to know" is nothing more than an illusion. It is a members only environment, reputable news papers and their affiliated television stations are the only media with access to information. Magazines and small newspapers are not allowed into any of the press conferences nor are they allowed access to any of the news releases. Public information is not truly public; it "belongs to private organizations (Gamble, 2004 p. 46)." Officials are even instructed not to give interviews with anyone who is not directly affiliated with an established club (Gamble, 2004). Until recently the foreign press was denied access to information as well. Each club has strict rules and in order to maintain an "open" relationship with the officials they are covering the members of the club must adhere to these rules. There are certain stories that are completely off limits even if the members of the club have full access to the facts. Blackboard agreements are stories that members of the club are to disregard completely until press conferences are held for the given stories. Any research done above and beyond the press conference is done in vain because it cannot be published without violating a press club rule. The main foundation for club rules is equality. Everyone in every club has equal access to all

information provided by the government or business they are covering. No one is allowed to get “the scoop” on any other journalists or papers (Freeman, 2000).

In American Journalism everyone has access to the information, which creates a much more competitive environment. As Frantzich (1995) points out, the White House press conferences and news releases are not only available to all media or even to all people through the media, if any citizen wishes to access a direct transcript of these conferences or releases; it is available to him or her on-line. This would be completely unheard of in the exclusive world of Japanese media. The United States Congress went a step further to guarantee every citizen access to information. The Freedom of Information Act of 1966 allows all citizens access to public records and gives them the right to attend meetings of public agencies (1966).

The information flow in Japan is not only restricted to the members of the media clubs but is also a very delicate matter within the clubs. If any member steps outside the boundaries of the club and either gathers information beyond what is approved or prints an article which is unfavorable to their information source that journalist could potentially be removed from the club. Although the source seemingly has very little power on paper, it has an amazing ability to control what is written through the power of information. The consequences of violating the rules of the clubs are so great that it is seldom ever done. If a journalist is kicked out of a club it is impossible for him or her to remain a reputable journalist in the eyes of the Japanese. He or she would no longer be able to work for the mainstream press and therefore no longer have open access to any information provided by the government (Freeman, 2000).

With the exception of a few instances, such as a journalist for NBC that I will mention later, the most reputable journalists are the ones who dig deeper and get the entire story. The most well known and respected journalists in the history of the United States are Woodward and Bernstein because they uncovered the White House involvement in the Watergate scandal (Vivian, 2005). Even when the media upsets the White House it is not able to cut them off completely. President Carter continued to hold an average of two press conferences a month in spite of the press becoming more critical of the administration (Grossman, 1979). While not every administration is as open during darker periods as the public may think they should be, there is never a time when the administration is able to completely lock out a given journalist or newspaper (Freeman, 2000).

Another reason why the Japanese press seldom prints controversial or critical pieces about their sources is because of the close relationship individual journalists have with their source. Initially when a journalist is assigned to a particular source they meet him or her every morning and become a shadow for the rest of the day. Eventually as the source becomes familiar with his or her journalist shadow the journalist becomes a friend. It is not unusual for a journalist to be invited into a sources home and have dinner with the source on a regular basis. Journalists are often provided with rooms, desks, and other supplies on the sources dime. Some journalists are given bus passes and elaborate gifts. Elaborate parties are thrown and journalists attend these parties feeling not the slightest conflict of interest.

In the United States the relationship between official sources and the media is much more rigid. As Reedy (1976) points out in his analysis of Lyndon B. Johnson, presidents often feel the press is never neutral. The administration is on its guard with

the press because oftentimes when the press searches for news that will sell it is the news that defames the official that appeals to readers. Grossman (1979) illustrates this relationship: “The President tends to see reporters in highly controlled and structured situations (p. 49).” One can see by this that the press and an official source would never be seen sitting together in the source’s home having a casual meal as in the Japanese system. Along with a more strained relationship come higher expectations in the area of conflict of interest. Freeman (2000) found that the *Washington Post* would not allow its journalists to accept gifts valued at more than \$25. The *New York Times* has a similar rule but the limit is set at \$20 (p. 81). Many newspapers tell their journalists not to accept even the smallest gift. Anything that may give the appearance of conflict of interest could hurt the journalist’s and possibly the paper’s credibility. Even when doing a human interest piece journalists will think twice about accepting anything from his or her source. In the eyes of the reader’s a gift could easily be viewed as a bribe (Vivian, 2005).

Parallels Between the Nations’ Media

According to Freeman (2000) the press and the state in Japan have a codependent relationship. The press relies on the government to provide information to put into its papers and broadcasts. If this information was not released to the press journalists would have a very difficult time uncovering anything that was happening within the government. The government on the other hand relies on the media to act as a sort of public relations vehicle. In the same way that the press would have a difficult time finding a story if the government would not provide them with interviews, press conferences, and press releases, the government would have a very difficult time getting its message to the people. In turn officials would have a hard time getting elected if the public was not aware of whom they were voting for. Candidates depend on the press for this very reason. As Nester (1989) points out, “television and radio stations operate under strict government guidelines that generally forbid any political slant while guaranteeing each candidate equally limited opportunity for appeals during Diet elections (50).”

This is the same type of system that the United States uses. Grossman (1979) says that especially in the beginning of an administration the press and officials “are allies working toward the same objective—to obtain maximum media exposure for the new administration, its staff, and its policies (p. 41).” It is during this part of the administration that the press and the government officials agree on what is important and “newsworthy.” Even after this period is over and the press becomes more critical, the White House offers regular press conferences while journalists offer exposure. During campaigns the candidates rely strongly on the media to expose the individual platform to the public. The media are required to give equal airtime or space to each candidate through advertising, debates, and even human interest pieces (Pember, 2005). These are the same guidelines that the Japanese government imposes on their press, as mentioned above.

In Japan, it is impossible for a journalist to speak against the government in any way while maintaining access to the information it has to offer. The press/state relationship takes on more of a servant/master form as Freeman words it, “let them serve you but keep them ignorant (p. 24).” The kisha clubs of Japan make it easy for the government to maintain this type of relationship. The membership of these clubs is

exclusive and the practice of the government to only speak to these elite members makes competition within the press difficult if not impossible. The media are used more often as a way to paint the government in a positive light regardless of its true actions. The press in Japan “suffer from a range of environmental and internal constraints that inhibit the ability or inclination of newspapers to either actively search for or print as much politically sensitive information as they potentially could (Nester, 1989 p. 33).” The majority of the press do not feel that the “people’s right to know” exists at all in Japan. Nester (1979) quotes an anonymous reporter who makes this point by saying, “The government only releases information that helps it maintain power, but suppresses information which would hurt it politically (33).”

Many critics would say the same thing of the American press. The Sedition Acts passed by congress in times of war and in times of peace often prevented the press from saying anything critical of the government. While these acts were abolished, the government nonetheless, has a history of trying to censor the press for its own benefit in spite of the constitutional right to freedom of the press (Pember, 2005). Stork (1993) sees the same patterns in modern day media and government relations, “When it comes to foreign matters, the media reports not so much what goes on in the world as what the White House says goes on. The State does not control the media in any crude or direct way, but the government more than any other party sets the agenda in the tone (p. 4).” This is similar to how Freeman presents the Japanese press. As I mentioned before, it is not the government that directly controls the media but the clubs and the threat of losing access to information that in a round about way censors the media. Just as a reporter could be kicked out of the kisha club for persistently reporting against the government, Minskin (1992) mentions a reporter from a news station affiliated with NBC who was fired after he was accused of being “too persistent [and] aggressive” in his questioning of the president (p. 35).

One other drawback of the lack of competition in the Japanese media is that the papers take on uniform look and content. The papers never seem to report anything differently from another paper. It is as if each paper is nothing more than a paraphrasing of one of the other papers. Both the stories themselves and the angle from which they are covered are nearly identical (Freeman, 2000). This lack of competition makes it easier for the journalists; they don’t have to work as hard to get the “scoop” on another journalist. They can feel secure in knowing that each paper or station is getting the exact same information they are getting from the exact same source and will not print or broadcast anything beyond that. When a journalist begins to work for a paper they are instilled with values emphasized by all the newspapers in Japan: “loyalty, hierarchy, and conformity (Nester, 1989 p. 33).” This conformity acts not only as a restraint but in many ways it acts as a safety net. The job security in this type of system is perfect, so long as one commits to the ideas of the entire system.

In the United States media the conformity is not as apparent as it is in the Japanese press. Also the conformity stems not only from restrained methods of information gathering but from the use of the Associated Press as well. The United States has more access to information and the consequences for using this information in an article are little to none in comparison to the Japanese media’s strict conformity policies. However, more and more papers are using articles from the Associated Press. This use creates more uniformity in the smaller papers of the nation. Vivian (2005) points

out that sociologists fear that U.S. media are becoming more and more similar in the manner and material they report. Using articles from this pool cuts down on expenses for a newspaper, in that they do not have to send correspondents to get the story. While this is different from the uniformity of the Japanese press it is uniformity nonetheless. The American media do have some issues with uniformity as a result of access to the same press releases and attending the same press conferences but not to the extent that the Japanese media do.

Conclusion

The United States and Japanese media have experienced ups and downs in their relationship with the government. Wars have caused both governments to create laws they feel protects the nation while they may in fact be suppressing the citizens and its free press. The government in both nations also contains corruption and devises ways to cover up that corruption and keeping it out of the media. There are differences in the two countries' media because of their histories, but there are many similarities as well. It could be argued that one nation lets the media get away with too much while the other lets the government get away with more. The media are an important part of a free nation and understanding its importance and its pitfalls is the best way to become an educated citizen aware of motives of both the government as well as the media itself. The differences between Japanese and United States media are a result of the diverse political backgrounds which lead to diverse expectations from the citizens. In spite of this, however, the similarities in the media suggest that a free press will yield similarities in spite of outside actors and influences.

Works Cited

- Cooper-Chen, Anne (1997). *Mass Communication in Japan*. Ames Iowa: Iowa State University Press.
- Dodd, Lawrence C., Jillson, Calvin. (1994). *New Perspectives on American Politics*. Washington D.C.: CQ Press.
- Editors (1989). Public Demonstrations and Secret Politics in China. *TDR* 33, 4-7.
- Fiorina, Morris P., Peterson, Paul E.(1998). *The New American Democracy*. Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon.
- Frantzich, Stephan (1995). Press Briefings Exercise. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28, 728-730
- Freeman, Laurie Anne (2000). *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gamble, Adam, & Wantanabe, Takesato (2004). *A Public Betrayed: An Inside Look at Japanese Media Atrocities and Their Warnings to the West*. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing Inc.
- Grossman, Michael B., Kumar, Martha J. (1979). The White House and the News Media: The Phases of their Relationship. *The Political Science Quarterly*. 94, 37-53.
- Lang, Kurt (1974). Images of Society: Media Research in Germany. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*. 335-51.
- Miskin, Al. (1992). Mediations: The News Industry. *Middle East Report*. 177, 35 & 42.
- Mott, Frank Luther (1962). *American Journalism: A History 1690-1960*. 3rd ed. New York: MacMillan Co.
- Nester, William. Japan's Mainstream Press: Freedom to Conform? *Pacific Affairs*. 62, 29-39.
- Pember, Don R., Clay Calvert (2005). *Mass Media Law*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Reedy, George E. (1976) The President and the Press: Struggle for Dominance. *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science*. 427, 65-72.
- Skowronek, Stephen. (1982) *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities 1877-1920*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stockwin, J.A. (1999) *Governing Japan*. Maine: Blackwell Publishing.

Stork, Joe, Flanders, Laura (1993). Power Structure of the American Media. *Middle East Report*.180,2-7.

Vivian, John (2005). *Media of Mass Communication*. Boston: Pearson.

Author biography

Eliza Koch was born in 1984. She grew up on a farm outside of Gaylord, Minnesota. She has two brothers and is the middle child. She graduated from Sibley East High School in 2003. She thoroughly took pleasure in her English classes. Sibley East, also, offered her the opportunity to act in a number of plays as well as co-edit the yearbook her senior year.

After high school Eliza attended Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato for two years. Upon receiving her Associates degree she transferred to Minnesota State University, Mankato. She is currently working on her Bachelors degree in mass communications- public relations with a minor in political science. It was during one of these political science classes that she stumbled upon this project. Her professor, Eiji Kawabata, encouraged her to develop a paper she wrote for his Politics in the Asian Pacific Rim course.

She has worked at J.C. Penney since 2003 to pay for her schooling. After college she hopes to secure a career in the public relations field. Ideally Eliza would like to work for a public relations firm in the Twin Cities. She currently resides in North Mankato.

Faculty Mentor's Biography

Eiji Kawabata taught in the Department of Political Science at Minnesota State University, Mankato