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The Japanese Press: a Global Exception?

Economic Crisis and Political Polarization

By César Castellvi

Although little known abroad, the Japanese press holds an important place in the global media landscape, two of the top circulation newspapers being Japanese dailies. How do these titles thrive, and how do they shape the public debate in Japan? This article studies specificities of the Japanese media market and some of its recent changes.

Since Donald Trump entered the war against the liberal media, the polarization of the media world has been a topic of growing interest for researchers and journalists. While the American media system is often mentioned for its polarization between conservative and liberal media, recent work has shown that in the French case, the polarization tends to be structured on an opposition between institutional and “anti-elite” media.¹ The objective of this paper is to briefly present some specificities of the Japanese media market and the way in which a polarization process can be observed there, by focusing on the case of the national daily press.

The Japanese daily press has long been an exception in a global media landscape where this type of publication has been hard hit by several crises, in particular the

¹ According to the results of research conducted by the Institut Montaigne in collaboration with the Media Lab and the School of Journalism at Sciences Po, as well as the Center for Civic Media at MIT (<https://www.institutmontaigne.org/publications/media-polarization-la-francaise>).

crisis in readership and advertising revenues. Newspapers in Japan have traditionally sought to reach the widest possible readership, refusing clear political endorsement, providing local and national coverage, and distancing themselves from the traditional distinction between “popular papers” and “quality papers”. However, recent transformations in reading practices and the aging of the traditional readership make this model unsustainable. In this context, the trend toward “an opinion-oriented model” as a survival strategy seems to be a direction taken by more and more newspapers. As we shall see, this also has consequences on the work of journalists and, more broadly, in the ability of the news media to play their role in the public sphere.

The Subscription to a Newspaper as “a Proof of Citizenship”

In 2018, among the ten largest circulation figures worldwide, four were Japanese dailies, including the top two. Several arguments are often put forward to explain this apparent liveliness of the Japanese print media. The first is the role of subscriptions, which account for 95% of newspaper sales (compared to 32% in France in 2014) and the major function of the large distribution networks that belong directly to the main newspaper’s companies (the *Senbaiten*). This distribution system still allows a large part of the population to receive a newspaper, no matter what happens. The loyalty of these subscriptions is partly due to an attachment to the material presence of the newspaper; one does not necessarily read it, but it connects the family to the rest of the world; Kaori Hayashi, a professor at the University of Tokyo and a media specialist, goes so far as to refer to a subscription to a daily newspaper as “one of the proofs of Japanese citizenship”.²

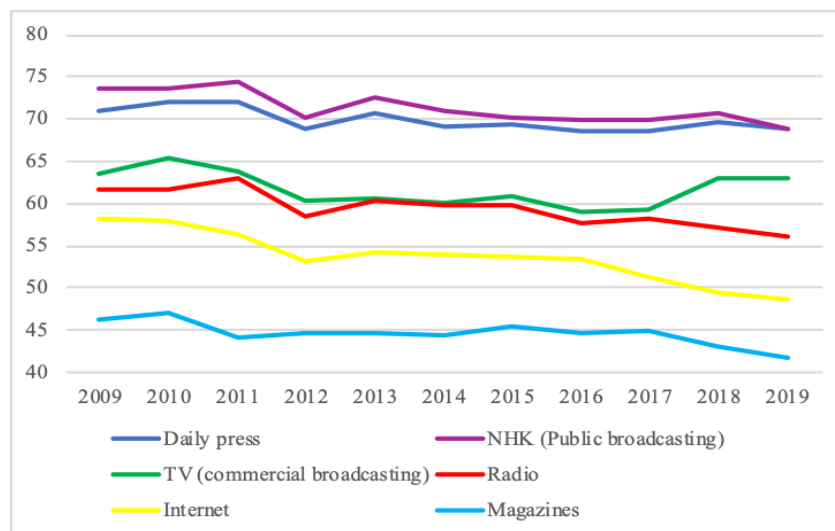
| Newspaper | Circulation | Country |
|-----------------|-------------|---------|
| Yomiuri Shinbun | 9,101,000 | Japan |
| Asahi Shinbun | 6,622,000 | Japan |
| USA Today | 4,139,000 | USA |
| Dainik Bhaskar | 3,818,000 | India |
| Dainik Jagran | 3,308,000 | India |

² Hayashi Kaori, “The Silent Public in a Liberal State: Challenges for Japan’s Journalism in the Age of the Internet”, In. *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism. Japan and the World Order*. Edited by Yoichi Funabashi and G. John Ikenberry. Brookings Institution Press. Washington. D.C. 2019, p. 350.

| | | |
|----------------------|-----------|-------|
| Mainichi Shinbun | 3,166,000 | Japan |
| Cankao Xiaoxi | 3,073,000 | China |
| Amar Ujala | 2,935,000 | India |
| The Times of India | 2,836,000 | India |
| Nihon Keizai Shinbun | 2,729,000 | Japan |

Newspaper Ranking by Paper Circulation in 2018³

As a source of information for the population, the daily press also differs greatly from the magazine press (weeklies, monthlies, sports papers). The latter is often compared to the English tabloids because of its sensationalist character, its taste for political scandals and the world of show business. Opinion and commentary have a greater place in it, but it does not have the same level of credit. Indeed, newspapers and television channels have a monopoly on the publication of institutional information because of their reserved access to legitimate sources (national and local administrations, public authorities, large companies, etc.).⁴ Regarding news production, one of the consequences of this division of labor between television and daily newspapers, on the one hand, and magazines on the other, may be identified in the way the Japanese perceive their media. In 2019, the daily press enjoys the highest level of credit as a source of information, just ahead of the public channel NHK and far ahead of the Internet and the magazine press.



³ According to data published by the World Association of News Publishers 2019.

⁴ Castellvi César, « Press clubs in Japan. The journalist, the company and its sources », *Sur le journalisme*, vol. 8, n 2, p. 124-137 (In French).

Another way of looking at the uniqueness of the Japanese daily press requires to look at the specificities of its contents. The broad typologies often used to categorize types of newspapers such as “opinion versus news”, popular versus quality press, national versus local news are difficult to apply to Japanese newspapers. Even though opinion in the pages of daily newspapers is often confined to editorials (*shasetsu*) and a few columns that are comparatively little present in relation to the news as a whole, one can distinguish clear editorial colors on certain issues. Newspapers such as the *Asahi Shinbun* and the *Mainichi Shinbun* are often presented as moderate or even progressive on issues of society or international politics. In contrast, the *Yomiuri Shinbun* and the *Sankei Shinbun* are known for their conservative positions. The *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* (commonly known as *Nikkei*) is more business-oriented.

However, the impact of political color must be put into perspective. Newspaper subscriptions are more a matter of habit than partisan identification. The size of the circulation (more than a million for the smallest national daily) suggests a great heterogeneity of the readership. At the same time, the various recent surveys of Japanese reading practices show that the majority of Japanese readers are now elderly. Moreover, all the major dailies have sufficiently large editorial teams (sometimes several thousand journalists) to cover news ranging from major international events to local news stories and sports pages. Unlike in a country like France, major media are not solely present in the capital. The five national dailies and most of the major regional dailies present in each prefecture have a very dense network of offices that irrigate the information found within each publication, which, in addition to news from the capital, make up a significant part of the content. Likewise, regional dailies have their offices in Tokyo in order to be able to follow national policy without being completely dependent on the country’s major news agencies, *Kyōdō* and *Jiji*.

⁵ According to a survey published by in 2019 by the *Japan Press Research Institute*.

The Post-War Generalist Model

We need to explain the narrow political parallelism in the Japanese case.⁶ The limited place of opinion in the Japanese press has not always been the norm. In their early days, the “big newspapers” (*ō-shinbun*) of the Meiji period (1868–1912) built their reputation largely on explicit political lines and journalists who clearly stated their preference for a political party or faction.⁷ But this partisan logic quickly disappeared during the first part of the 20th century⁸. Following a period of repression of some newspapers, smaller, working-class dailies (*ko-shinbun*) developed, helping to generalize two norms: 1/ objectivity of the news (*kyakkan hōdō*) symbolized by a clear separation between information and opinion, and the anonymity of reporters behind the pages of their newspapers; and 2/ political impartiality (*fuhen futō*) embodied by the refusal to call for a follow-up or support for a particular political formation and the disappearance of a partisan press.⁹ While none of the major daily opinion papers of the early 20th century survived this period, these two standards have spread to the entire general press. The main contemporary dailies *Asahi Shinbun*, *Mainichi Shinbun* and *Yomiuri Shinbun* have inherited these standards by developing on a business model that has put aside overly political positions. The influence of American journalistic standards on this indigenous tradition was consolidated during the period of the country’s occupation between 1945 and 1952.

Television followed suit. For when the major private television groups appeared in the late 1950s, they were largely supported by the major national dailies, which invested in this new industry. This led to the emergence of five major conglomerates that are still the heart of news production in Japan today. Each media group links a major daily newspaper to a major chain based in Tokyo (*ki-kyoku*)

⁶ “Political parallelism” refers to the degree of alignment between the supply of news media and the different partisan factions. It is one of the variables used by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini to enable the comparison of media systems across countries (Hallin & Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, 2004).

⁷ Séguy Christiane, *Du sabre à la plume : Mémoires de journalistes engagés de l’époque Meiji*, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg (From Sword to Pen: Memoirs of Engaged Journalists of the Meiji Era), 2014.

⁸ Hara Toshio, *Jānarizumu no shisō* (Thought of Journalism), Iwanami shoten, Tokyo, 1997.

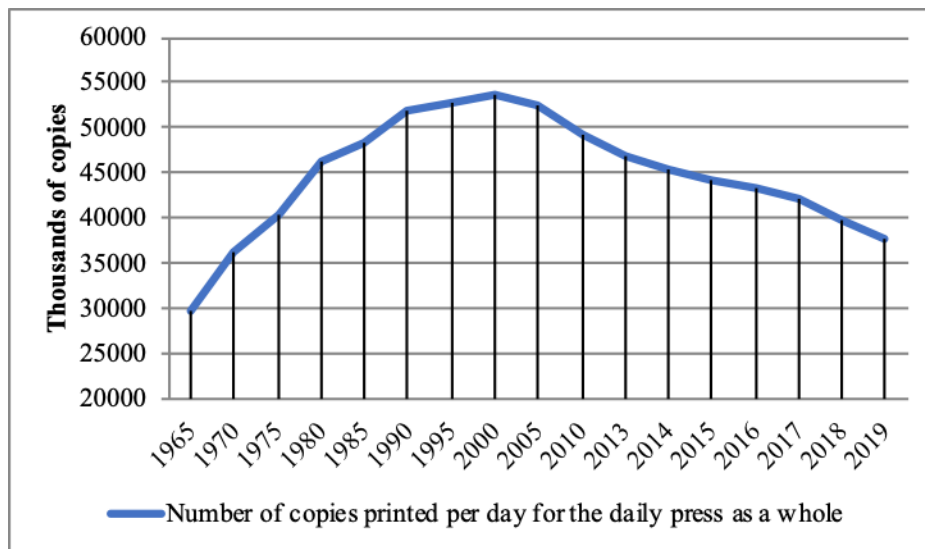
⁹ Newspapers attached to the major political parties exist, but this type of press remains far from the development of the major national daily newspapers. One can mention the communist daily Hakahata or the Seikyō Shinbun affiliated to the religious group Sōka Gakkai.

through a system of cross-capital shareholdings. Each of these major channels is at the center of a network of regional channels. To these conglomerates, we can also add the public broadcaster NHK, the Japanese equivalent of the BBC. Because of the strong connections between the daily press and television, the imperatives of objectivity of news and the avoidance of partisan positions have also spread to television news shows. Moreover, the rule of neutrality of television channels is a legal obligation due to its inclusion in Article 4 of the Broadcasting Law (*Hōsō hō*). This article imposes the respect of “political impartiality” and “plurality of points of view”.

It is in this particular context that the main news media developed throughout the second half of the 20th century. Supported by a growing population until the end of the second baby boom in 1974, rapid economic growth and a relatively stable political context under the Liberal Democratic Party between 1955 and the mid-1990s, the generalist media became empowered in the publication of news based on factual descriptions of events with a deep appeal for news stories, including the major daily newspapers in Tokyo and Osaka. The very wide dissemination of the journalistic standards in force in the daily press and on television has thus contributed to the construction of a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, Japan has seen itself as a democracy aligned with “Western” standards in terms of news production (indeed, until the end of the 1980s, Japan was practically the only democracy in East Asia that respected press freedom). At the same time, the Japanese press has put aside both some of the political and social contestations as well as the claims of minorities (the differences between the institutional press and the Okinawan media are an example of this). Eventually, it has undoubtedly contributed to the crystallization of the myth of a homogenous society that is still sometimes evoked.

The Decline of the Mainstream Press

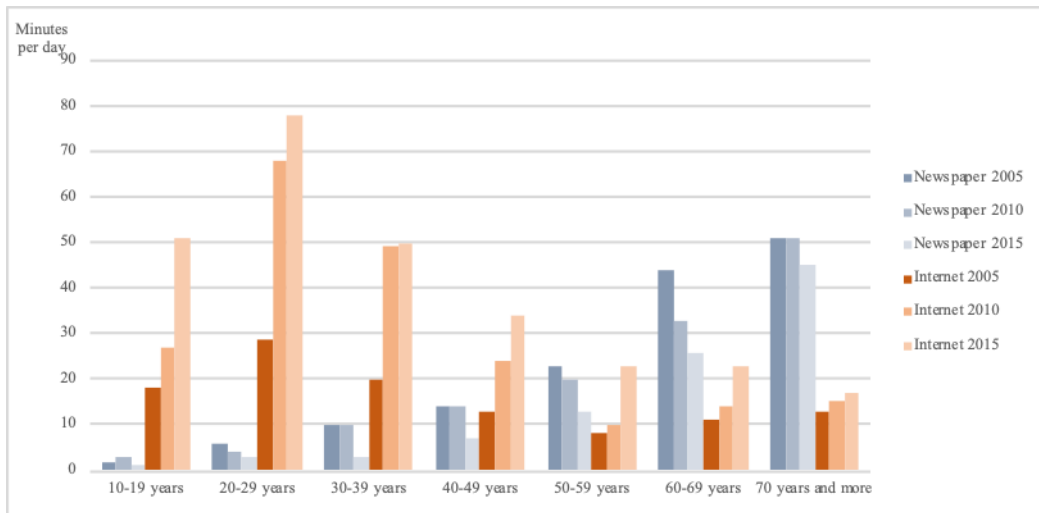
Since the peak in total circulation reached in 1997, the daily press has entered a period of decline, most noticeably in the last ten years.



Total circulation of Japanese daily press per day between 1965 and 2019¹⁰

The decrease in paper sales is accompanied by a reduction in advertising revenues, which became more pronounced with the economic crisis of 2008, similar to what can be observed in the newspaper industry in other countries. While the gradual increase in subscription rates has maintained overall revenues, it has increased the dependence of newspaper companies on paper at a time when newspapers are failing to renew their aging readership. At the same time, digital expansion in newsrooms is struggling to establish itself as a new model. The lack of publicly available figures on the share of digital in total newspaper revenues prevents us from seeing how digital really ranks. But there are indications that the development of institutional media on the Internet is far from being a solution to the hemorrhaging of audiences. The first is the weak position of institutional media in access to information via the Internet. The majority of Japanese people now prefer free online platforms such as Yahoo News, which alone accounts for 54% of Internet access to information.

¹⁰ Based on data from the *Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association*.



*Changes in Reading Practices by Generation Between 2005 and 2015*¹¹

However, we must remember that these portals produce little information themselves and merely refer to the pages of the institutional media. A second index concerns the digital offer in the daily press. The prices offered by daily newspapers for their digital-only versions do not really differ from the paper rates.¹² The prices offered by the dailies for their digital-only versions do not really differ from the paper rates.¹³ The *Yomiuri Shinbun*, the world's leading daily newspaper in terms of circulation, does not even offer an exclusively digital subscription independent of the print subscription. Only the business daily *Nikkei Shinbun* seems to be the exception, with an increase in its revenues from digital-only subscriptions (it is in fact the daily that communicates the most on this subject).¹⁴ It can be seen that the paper-centered model, itself based on a large and heterogeneous readership and the editorial characteristics mentioned above, continues to be the main economic model for the institutional press, but its future is uncertain due to the non-renewal of its audience.¹⁵ Finally, online news sites are for the moment limited to the distribution of franchises such as, for the most

¹¹ According to NHK's *Kokumin seikatsu jikan chōsa* survey published every five years.

¹² See the Digital News Reporter 2019 report published by the Reuter Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford.

¹³ As an example, the monthly subscription to the paper version of the *Asahi Shinbun* is 4,037 yen (€33) per month while the equivalent digital subscription is 3,800 yen (€31-50). In addition, the subscription to the paper version does not give automatic access to the digital content, as the reader has to pay an additional 1,000 yen.

¹⁴ Doctor Ken, « Newsonomics: Four years in to their surprise marriage, what has the FT done for *Nikkei*, and vice versa? », 6 novembre 2019, on the [website NiemanLab.org](http://www.niemanlab.org).

¹⁵ Villi Miko & Hayashi Kaori. 2015. "The Mission is to Keep this Industry Intact" Digital transition in the Japanese newspaper industry", *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 18, no 8, p. 960-977.

visible, the Japanese versions of the Huffington Post or BuzzFeed, whose impact on the public space remains limited.¹⁶ There is no equivalent of *Mediapart* or *Slate*.

The Consequences of the Economic Crisis and the Signs of a New Polarization of the Media Market

Here we need to make explicit the connections between the economic crisis in the press and the process of polarization at work in the media world. In the words of sociologist and media historian Takumi Satō about the situation of the daily press, the current logic is not so much to widen the audience, as was the case in the expansion phase of the industry until the late 1990s, but to try to retain the most loyal readers.¹⁷ This economic situation has consequences for the non-partisan editorial model based on a broad readership typical of the Japanese institutional press. A first notable point is the increased visibility of reporters working in editorial offices. While the anonymity of writers was a norm shared by most daily newspapers until the late 1990s, greater visibility—even a kind of starvation—for some reporters is a change in the logic common to the national and regional press. This can be observed in several ways. We can note the widespread use of individual bylines at the bottom or at the top of articles, the creation of accounts for salaried reporters on the various social networks, and the growth of columns in which journalists talk about their life experiences (maternity, serious illnesses, support for parents who have become dependent).¹⁸

The economic crisis in the media and the uncertainties about the future also explain a process of return of opinion and the polarization of institutional media content. This can be seen in the media coverage of social issues and in the changing positions of certain newsrooms. Let us look at a few examples. The nuclear accident

¹⁶ Yamakoshi Shuzo, « "Legimitation Crisis" of Journalism in Japan », *Keio Communication Review*, n° 41, 2019.

¹⁷ Satō Takumi, « The Polarization of the Japanese Media and the Need for Common Ground », 16 février 2016, on the website Nippon.com, URL=>https://www.nippon.com/fr/in-depth/a05002/?cx_recs_click=true

¹⁸ Castellvi César, « Byline or Perish: reporter's bylines at the heart of Japanese newspaper transformation », *Terrains & Travaux*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2017, pp. 55-77 (in French).

on 11 March 2011 received wide media coverage in Japan and abroad. It also brought back to the forefront the issue of the place of civil nuclear power in the country's energy mix, an issue on which the major national media had never really highlighted their divergence before. Indeed, during its expansion from the late 1950s onwards, civil nuclear energy was the subject of a form of consensus by the major media, which made a major contribution to its promotion.¹⁹ The disaster caused by the accident at the power station, while becoming a subject of debate within civil society, at the same time allowed certain newspapers to stand out. Whereas it was not previously known for having a particular editorial line, the *Tokyo Shinbun* (Tokyo's main regional daily) very quickly adopted a position openly favorable to a nuclear phase out and particularly critical of the Japanese government's policy on disaster management. The editor of the newspaper's investigative department explained the newspaper's very clear position in an interview in February 2014 as follows:

“For us, who have a smaller circulation than the other major newspapers in Tokyo²⁰, we have the advantage of being a little less worried about taking new positions. For the big dailies, they cannot afford to take too strong position because of the risk of creating discontent among readers. There's a tendency to be a little conservative about editorial choices because of that. By contrast, for us, renewal is essential if we don't want to be crushed. That's what pushed us to take a more radical stance, to take up the challenge.”

The link between taking a position and placement on the editorial market appears here in the background by reference to the pressure from the major dailies and the need to stand out. This strengthening of opinion is not only identified by the position taken in the newspaper's editorial. Other dailies such as the *Asahi* have also adopted a similar stance regarding the place of civilian nuclear power, as in its editorial on 13 July 2011. It is more a question of identifying the presence of clear positions on certain news topics, including in the pages usually devoted to facts, such as the political or society pages. Apart from the official position taken by the newspaper's editorial, the trend is also perceptible through the numerous investigative articles published in the general information pages. More recently, the *Tokyo Shinbun* has continued to highlight its singularity by regularly sending one of its stars, journalist Mochizuki Isoko, to cover the press conferences of the cabinet

¹⁹ Bruno Tino, « L'exposition sur les usages pacifiques de l'énergie atomique (1955-1957) : L'exemple de Tokyo et du quotidien Yomiuri Shinbun (1955) », *Ritsumeikan gengo bunka kenkyū*, 2017, Vol. 29, no. 1, p. 145-169.

²⁰ Nevertheless, the daily newspaper will still have a daily circulation of more than 440,000 copies in 2019.

secretary general, the government spokesperson. This journalist has a number of peculiarities compared to her colleagues in rival media. She does not come from the political department (*Seijibu*), which usually covers this institution, but from the City news department (*Shakaibu*), where reporters in charge of corruption cases and police investigations work. It is also regularly noted for its various breaches of the formal and implicit rules governing highly codified press conferences in Japanese politics, which generally leave journalists with little means to really ask what they want (short speaking time, limited number of questions). What is of interest to us is the choice of the Tokyo Shinbun to send a journalist to act as the editorial standard-bearer, personifying the daily's editorial line with a position that is openly hostile to the political power in place.

The Battle for Readership

In contrast to the neutral tone that dominates the editorial landscape, another daily stands out for its stance that radically departs from the post-war model to attract and retain a readership. This is the conservative *Sankei Shinbun*, the smallest of the national dailies in terms of circulation, selling only 1.3 million copies a day. Economically weaker than its rivals, the *Sankei* is the first national daily to have abandoned the publication of its evening edition (*Yūkan*) in 2001, while all the others still have two editions a day (morning and evening). It is a forerunner of the use of the Internet for its circulation, with the creation of its first site in 1996 and a lower price than its competitors in its digital version. But above all, the *Sankei Shinbun* is known for its openly nationalist, even revisionist and critical editorial line towards any rapprochement with China and the Korean peninsula.

The conservative turn in the editorial line of this newspaper dates back to the 1970s, but already corresponds to a period of difficulty.²¹ Since the beginning of 2010, the newspaper has opted for an even more aggressive editorial policy by allocating significant resources to investigate the coverage of the subject of “comfort women”

²¹ Jōmaru Yōichi, “*Shokun*” – “*Seiron*” no kenkyū – *Hoshu genron ha dō henyō shite kita ka* » (Studies on “*Shokun*” and “*Seiron*.” How the conservative press has metamorphosed), Iwanami shoten, Tokyo, 2011.

(women of Asian origin forced to work in Japanese army brothels during the Second World War) by the liberal media, and the daily *Asahi* in particular. In August 2014, after several years of criticism due to a lack of irrefutable evidence, the *Asahi* was forced to acknowledge that a series of sixteen articles about “comfort women” published between the 1980s and 1990s were based on falsified testimony from a witness at the time. The media campaign launched by the *Sankei* on the basis of editorials and investigations against the *Asahi* was particularly harsh. The subtitle chosen for a book published in October 2014 by a team of *Sankei* journalists on the case set the tone: “The war of history: denouncing the lies spread by the *Asahi Shinbun* around the world about ‘comfort women’ (Asian women forced to work in Japanese army brothels during World War II) by the liberal media, and the *Asahi* newspaper in particular. In addition to its investigations into the matter, the *Sankei* has given much space to comments from outside speakers openly accusing the *Asahi* of ‘betraying the nation,’ and claiming it was in short, ‘an enterprise to be dismantled.’

Without going into more detail on the controversy, it is important to recall the place of economic competition between the major media in the context of declining audiences and revenues. According to Kaori Hayashi, these violent attacks by one newspaper on another must be read in the light of the *Sankei*’s special relationship with its readership. On the basis of a 2016 opinion poll that questioned a panel of readers who were all subscribers to a daily newspaper, she notes that the *Sankei* stands out from its competitors by a feeling of ideological proximity between the newspaper’s editorial line and the ideas defended by its readers.²² The same survey attests to the fact that for the other major dailies, the feeling of proximity to a particular editorial line is not the main criterion for subscriptions, and attests to the maintenance of the generalist logic centered on an ideologically broad readership as much as possible. As in the case of the *Tokyo Shinbun* presented above, the strengthening of an editorial line with a view to building readership loyalty is a trend shared by media that find themselves in less economically stable situations than others. This pushes them to move away from the generalist model based on a readership without a pronounced identification with an editorial line.

²² Kaori Hayashi, *Media Fushin* (Media mistrust), Iwanami shoten, Tokyo, 2017, p. 149-150.

The Risks Associated with the Political Polarization of the Media

The polarization of editorial lines is not necessarily negative. On the contrary, it can be seen as evidence of the ability of the Japanese media to represent a diversity of opinions. Nevertheless, media criticism campaigns against other media have consequences that, while difficult to identify, are probably not in favor of the media institution as a whole. In a report published by the United Nations in charge of a study on the situation of media and information in Japan in 2016, the representative in charge of the investigation, David Kaye, pointed out the problems posed by the weakness of professional solidarity among journalists and the exploitation of this weakness by the political authorities.²³ The omnipresence of the logic of competition and the exacerbation of the economic war between media groups can also be questioned.



*'Anti Asahi Shinbun' demonstration in the Shibuya district of Tokyo*²⁴. The poster to the right of the demonstrators' vehicle says: "Let's block the purchase of the Asahi, a newspaper that lies and falsifies. The anti-Japanese Asahi is not to be read, not to be bought".

Japan is not the first country that comes to mind when the subject of the dangers faced by journalists as a result of their work comes up. Physical violence against journalists remains rare, though not completely non-existent.²⁵ However, it is important to mention that demonstrations directly targeting certain media (as shown

²³ The preliminary report is available at the following address:

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=19842>

²⁴ Photo taken by the author in May 2014.

²⁵ Between 1987 and 1990, an extreme right-wing group calling itself *Sekihōtai* was responsible, among other things, for several attacks on the Asahi Shinbun. The most violent was the shooting death of two reporters at their workplace in the Kobe region on 3 May 1987.

in the photo above) have become more common in the streets of Tokyo over the past few years. In addition to the obligation of the threatened media to organize protection for their employees, they actually contribute to a degradation of the working environment for reporters for whom intimidation is a reality they have to reckon with. Following the violent campaign against *Asahi Shinbun's* coverage of the "comfort women" issue, a former reporter who published articles on this topic in the early 1990s, before becoming a university researcher more recently, received several death threats in the form of anonymous phone calls and social network messages. The biggest surprise that resulted from this event is undoubtedly the lack of widespread condemnation from the journalistic world. In this case too, one can guess that economic competition took precedence over professional solidarity and support for a threatened colleague.

Conclusion

In an era of declining readership and revenues for print and television, the desire of some newspapers to secure a share of loyal readers is legitimate. But it can also become a cause for concern when the direction taken leads to an alliance with the government or consists of smear campaigns against companies or individuals. Although not as clearly identified as in the American media, the polarization between liberal and conservative media is more easily observed in the print media, which has a high level of freedom of tone. For television, while this medium remains more constrained by the legal framework that obliges it to be "politically neutral," many are concerned about the widespread presence of speakers with comments hostile to certain communities or countries, particularly against South Korea. As with the print media, Japanese television today is facing a decline in its audience and a distancing from the younger generation. In the context of economic warfare between media seeking to secure a more loyal audience, the choice of polemics and opposition is not a Japanese specificity. On the contrary, this climate is reminiscent of the situation also facing the news media in France today.

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