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Media collaborators threaten press freedom in Japan

City news reporters whose editorial focus includes crime prevention, don't always dig into criminal acts, as the case involving top prosecutor Hiromu Kurokawa (right) shows. | KYODO

The British journalist Claud Cockburn once wrote: "All stories are written backwards — they are supposed to begin with the facts and develop from there, but in reality, they begin with a journalist's point of view, a conception, and it is the point of view from which the facts are subsequently organized…"

Good journalists strive to produce balanced and objective news, starting from an independent point of view — although perfection is never attainable. Sadly, Japan has too few good journalists because mainstream media reporters unconsciously begin their stories from the point of view of prized informants.

Consider the recent scandal involving Hiromu Kurokawa, a top prosecutor who gambled playing mahjong for money with his buddies from major newspapers. The group gambled together regularly for years. Instead of reporting the crime, the newspapermen — two reporters from the Sankei Shimbun and a former reporter from the Asahi Shimbun (then working for a different department) — were party to the act.

This is important because a free society needs an independent press to guard the public against abuse of power. Kurokawa, believed to have close ties to Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, was the indirect beneficiary of a proposed bill on extending the mandatory retirement age of prosecutors. The bill was believed meant to justify an earlier Cabinet decision to extend Kurokawa's tenure so that, as media reports suggest, he could be promoted to the post of prosecutor-general this summer. Critics accused the prime minister of attempted cronyism. In the end, Kurokawa resigned. The Asahi Shimbun punished its employee with no more than a one month suspension.

Similar scandals involving the mainstream media abound. They are one reason Japan, a developed democracy, consistently ranks lower on scales of press freedom than you might expect. For instance, Reporters without Borders' 2020 World Press Freedom Index ranked Japan 66 out of 180 countries.

Shiro Segawa, a professor of political science and economics at Waseda University and a former deputy managing editor at the Mainichi Shimbun, says mass media firms don't produce enough independent or objective news because the industry runs as a closed shop.

A case in point is Japan's "*kisha* (press) clubs." The mainstream press controls the clubs, says Segawa, giving their own journalists exclusive and easy access to news conferences and an endless flow of press releases issued by the prime minister's office, government ministries, local authorities, police and so forth. Freelance journalists and reporters from other publications, including the weekly magazine Shukan Bunshun, which scooped the Kurokawa scandal, are usually not allowed into the clubs.
Press clubs efficiently deliver the news. But restricting news access also stymies independent and evidence-based reporting.

To illustrate, Segawa says that Abe wants his news conference statements published word for word. Reporters feel pressured to comply in order to maintain exclusive access. Journalists don't check or analyze if what the prime minister said is true or not. Access journalism encourages "he said" journalism, meaning: He said it, so I wrote it. "That's just propaganda devoid of critical analysis," says Segawa. "It's a good way not to take responsibility."

Journalists working for the mainstream media worry more about what their peers are covering, rather than in serving the public interest. They closely watch one another, seeking to cover the same stories. "The worst a reporter can do is 'to miss the boat' by not reporting on a topic carried by some other media," notes Segawa. So, all the major newspapers end up writing about the same topics.

Japan's schools and lifetime employment systems are partly to blame. Schools fail to encourage students to take risks. Once hired by a newspaper, few reporters ever change jobs. Careers advance by passage of time and risk avoidance. "Reporters may wish to dig deeper into a story," says Segawa. "However, the system prevents that."

In June 2017, two editorial desks within NHK clashed over their approach to covering the Kake Gakuen scandal, according to Segawa. In the broadcast program, NHK's political desk reporter spoke no more than the views of the prime minister, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga and those of the Cabinet Office. The city news desk reporter, on the other hand and to his credit, argued the Cabinet Office's explanation was insufficient and lacked transparency.

Segawa believes the conflict between the two desks caused NHK to forfeit a scoop to the Asahi Shimbun. Earlier, in May the same year, NHK filmed an interview with former administrative vice education minister Kihei Maekawa, a key witness to the Kake scandal. NHK chose not to air the scoop at the time for reasons never disclosed. Days later, the Asahi Shimbun published its own interview with Maekawa, kicking off the Kake scandal with revelations of ministry papers mentioning the prime minister's reported intent to push for the controversial opening of a new veterinary school. "It can be assumed that the reason behind NHK's decision not to air the interview is conflict between the political and city news desks within NHK," Segawa surmised.

One also wonders if NHK's decision was influenced by earlier statements by Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Sanae Takaichi. In February 2016, Takaichi indicated the government could revoke a broadcaster's license if its news coverage repeatedly failed to be politically impartial. Many experts took that as a veiled threat to punish broadcasters airing views which differed from those held by the ruling party.

Government doesn't have the same influence over newspapers as it does on broadcasters, as newspapers don't need a license to legally operate in Japan. Still, Segawa believes the mainstream press too often censors itself.
City news desk reporters whose editorial focus includes crime prevention, the police, the courts and prosecutors, don't always dig into criminal acts as the Kurokawa case shows. Segawa thinks reporters bond with informants who are primary news sources.

"They (come to) hold shared values," he says, to preserve important relationships. So political news desk reporters don't clarify or investigate what politicians say. And city news desk reporters stand on the side of the prosecutors, support their interests, rather than uncover or discover new facts and pursue the truth.

Speaking from experience Segawa says, "As journalists, our loyalty is supposed to be to citizens." He argues, "Mass media must be an open system to serve citizens."