

論 文

Japan's Press Club System and its Impact on Media Relations Practices

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Japan's Press Club System and its Impact on Media Relations Practices

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Japan is a media-saturated nation. Opinion surveys routinely show that more Japanese adults trust media outlets than trust any other institution. In this environment, Japanese public relations practice is almost entirely dominated by media relations. The key to successful media relations is how to deal with the press clubs, a century-old, cartel-like system in which journalists from major media outlets enjoy exclusive access to establishment sources. This paper attempts to identify various problems of the press club system and look into its impact on Japanese media relations practices.

日本における企業広報はメディア・リレーションズが中心であり記者クラブへの対応が重要な役割を担う。本稿は日本独特の制度である記者クラブに焦点を当て、そのメディア・リレーションズに及ぼす影響について考察する。

keyword : press club system, media relations, public relations, exclusivity, conduit
記者クラブ制度、メディア・リレーションズ、広報、排他性、仲介役

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1. Introduction

The power of the media can hardly be overstated. For public relations practitioners, dealing with the media is one of the most critical areas of their work. Unlike all other constituencies,¹ the media is both a constituency and a conduit through which all other constituencies—investors, suppliers, retailers, consumers, and so forth—develop images of a company (Argenti & Forman, 2002, p. 207). Investors, for example, might read an article in the newspaper and be impressed with a particular company to invest in. The management of media communication therefore has an enormous impact

on a company's ability to do business, or even to survive in a critical situation.

The media's role as disseminator of information to a company's key constituencies has gained increasing importance over the years. The advent of the Internet as a new media channel has reinforced such movement. But while the importance of the Internet is growing, one should not underestimate or ignore the power of the traditional media. This is particularly true in Japan where the traditional media, such as newspapers and television, still plays a key role in setting the press agenda and shaping public opinion.

The news media in Japan is dominated by one of the nation's most powerful interest groups, the press clubs (*kisha kurabu*), a century-old, cartel-like system in which journalists from major media outlets enjoy close and exclusive access to government officials, business executives, and other important sources. The system has long been criticized as antidemocratic by analysts both at home and abroad.

For this reason, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which came to power after winning the 2009 lower house elections, has moved to end the press club system and open up press conferences to non-club members, including foreign journalists and freelancers. But the DPJ's attempt has met with limited success thus far, and the press club system remains largely intact.

This paper attempts to identify various problems of the press club system and look into its impact on Japanese media relations practices. The paper then explores the way public relations practitioners in Japan should deal with the news media.

2. Why does Media Relations Matter?

Media relations is one of the most important areas in public relations practice in any democratic society. One pronounced difference between contemporary Japanese and American public relations practice is the role of media relations (Gibson, 1998). In the United States, media relations is very important in certain contexts, but not very important in others. However, Japanese public relations practice is almost entirely dominated by media relations.

Japan is a media-saturated nation, and the level of consumption of both newspapers and television is extremely high by global standards. Furthermore, the news media has the deep level of trust with the public (Open Source Center, 2009). The wide reach of news reporting, coupled with the trust it has earned from the Japanese people, gives the Japanese news media remarkable influence on the public agenda.

In terms of the size, the circulations of major Japanese newspapers are exceptionally large. The circulation of Japan's biggest newspaper, *Yomiuri Shimbun*, for example, is the highest in the world with more than 10,000,000 daily readers of its morning edition alone, about the same as the combined circulations of the top ten newspapers

in the United States (Gamble & Watanabe, 2004, p. 33). The most recent figure available for *Yomiuri* was 10,014,997 as of July 2010.²

The Japanese news media continues to be dominated by *Yomiuri* and four other newspaper companies—*Asahi* (with a circulation of 8.03 million), *Mainichi* (3.59 million), *Nihon Keizai* (3.05 million) and *Sankei* (1.76 million)³—plus national public broadcaster NHK. The five papers not only publish the national daily newspapers but also control commercial television and the majority of radio, and operate book and magazine divisions. They are indeed media conglomerates, not just newspaper publishers.

Opinion surveys routinely show that more Japanese adults trust media outlets than trust any other institution, and newspapers are still perceived as the most reliable news sources and television the most popular (Open Source Center, 2009). The bottom line is that Japan's news industry is not only one of the most massive, it is also one of the most powerful: a genuine Godzilla of the news (Gamble & Watanabe, 2004, p. 34).

In this environment, public relations practitioners in Japan have no choice but to turn most of their energy into media relations activity, and their success depends largely on how to deal with press clubs. "It is important to understand that press clubs are central to media relations, and public relations, in Japan," Gibson (1998) asserts.

3. Japanese Press Clubs

3.1. Exclusivity

Any discussion of connections between journalists and members of the political and economic elites inevitably raises the issue of the *kisha kurabu*, the press clubs of Japan (Kelly et al., 2002). The press club is not a media system unique to Japan; it exists in Western countries as well. For example, there are press clubs in the U.S. Department of Defense and in the White House. A major difference between press clubs in

Japan and in Western countries is that governments or concerned authorities decide who can be a member of press clubs in Western countries, while the members of press clubs decide who can join the press club in Japan.

In the case of American press clubs, if a foreign person registers as a journalist and is recognized by the government, he/she can report the news under the same conditions as American journalists. But this is not the case in Japan because press clubs are exclusive, and the system works virtually as a "closed shop" made up of journalists having proprietary access to information and sources (Freeman, 2000, pp. 67-68). This exclusivity is the main source of criticism of Japanese press clubs.

In Japan, press clubs are located in most major governmental, political and business organizations, and there are hundreds of them nationwide. In Tokyo, they can be found in every ministry, the headquarters of major political parties, important economic organizations, and other sports, entertainment, and consumer organizations. In the prefectures and larger cities, press clubs are located in local parliaments, police headquarters, the courts, and chambers of commerce (Freeman, 2000, pp. 68).

Unlike in Western countries where press conferences and briefings are sponsored by governments or concerned entities, in Japan it is the press clubs that sponsor all these press events. "Whereas press conferences in other free countries are organized and controlled by the sources and are open to all credentialed journalists, most of the news originating in Japan is filtered through formal press conferences and informal background briefings with individual or institutional sources that are organized by, and restricted to, members of the respective *kisha* clubs," Hall (1998, p. 52) explains. Naturally, press clubs play a key role in Japan's media environment, and those who cannot be a member

will be put in an extremely disadvantageous position.

The question then arises as to who is allowed to be in. With few exceptions, only members of Japanese establishment newspapers, broadcasters and news agencies are allowed to belong. Journalists for all magazines, political and religious publications, and tabloid newspapers are banned, as are freelance journalists. Until 1993, reporters for all foreign news outlets were also excluded. Indeed, only after significant international pressure was brought to bear were foreign journalists finally allowed membership in a limited number of the more important press clubs (Gamble & Watanabe, 2004, p. 45).

Unfortunately, membership has included conditions that limit foreign journalists to the status of mere observers or that do not allow them access to more intimate interactions with sources. In short, the privileges of foreign journalists remain limited at best. In October 2002, this exclusion of foreign journalists led to protests against the system by the European Union (EU), which called for the complete abolition of the Japanese press clubs.

In a report issued October 17, 2002, the EU said the press club system acts as "a de facto competitive hindrance" to foreign media organizations by denying them firsthand access to briefings at press clubs.⁴ "It unfairly makes them slower to bring information to their audience than domestic organizations, and, unable to put questions on the spot, forces them to rely on secondhand information. In effect, the system works as a restraint on free trade in information," it said.⁵

The EU's stand yielded some results, as Japan made a vague concession offer in February of 2004. Still, such a concession is not likely to substantially alter the nature of the clubs (Gamble & Watanabe, 2004, p. 46). Except for a tentative offer to provide foreign journalists access to press

conferences sponsored by press clubs, there would be little change to the system domestically. Indeed, very little progress has been made to increase access for Japanese magazine and freelance journalists.

In April 2010, a group of intellectuals including academics and journalists called on the government and major news associations to open news conferences to a wider spectrum of media, saying the closed nature of the press club system has compromised the public's right to know (Hongo, 2010). Calling the system "a cartel of news reporting," the group demanded that freelancers from nonmainstream media outlets be given access to all information provided by the government and be allowed to attend the "kondan," or off-the-record meetings with senior officials where inside information is often passed to the media.

As mentioned earlier, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) came to power pledging to abolish the press club system and open up press conferences to foreigners, freelancers, and online media. But they have not been very successful to date. The DPJ had only changed press access to four major ministries and agencies and did not immediately deliver on a campaign pledge to open up the prime minister's press conferences (McCargo & Lee, 2010). Moreover, Japan's mainstream news media has even made little or no reference to the ongoing press club wars. The reasons behind the situation may explain the peculiar relationships between the media and news sources.

3.2. *Non-adversarial Relationships*

Japan's press club system has a long history. It started in 1890 when the Imperial Diet opened its first session.⁶ The system has survived for such a long time because it is very convenient for both news sources and the media. Without press clubs, a news source would find great difficulties in

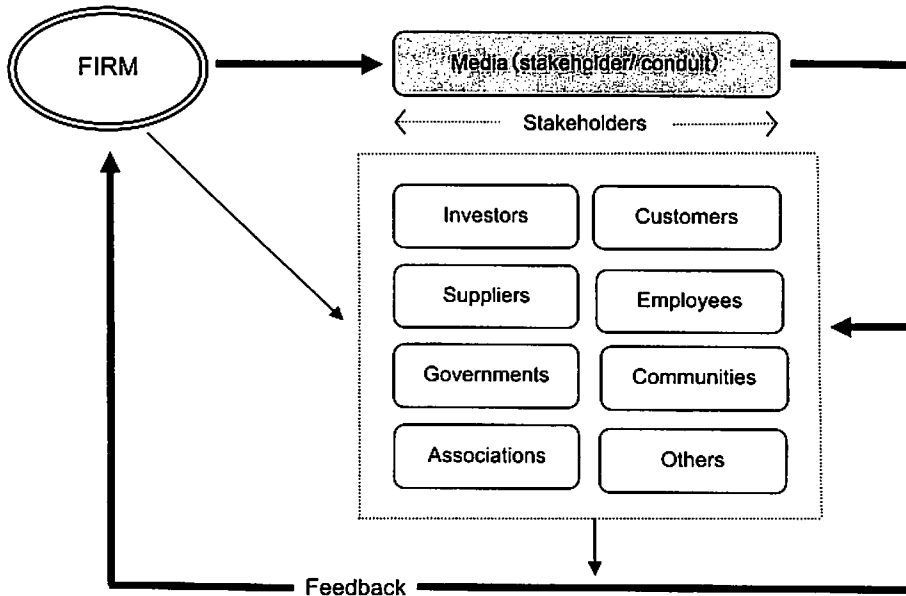
reaching all reporters to whom it wants to transmit news. However, because there is a press club at each news source, all it has to do is to go to the press club room and announce the news (Hirose, 1994).

For journalists, press clubs are also very handy. In the absence of press clubs, individual reporters would have to spend much time, energy, and money to investigate news. But if a journalist belongs to a press club, press meetings are fixed and information is provided. All members of the press club have access to the same sources so that they do not have to worry about missing the basic news items (Ogura & Seki, 1995, p. 87).

The press clubs have developed their current degree of rigidity as a result of an almost uninterrupted 50 year reign by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the absence of a viable opposition (O'Dwyer, 2005). After ruling Japan almost continuously since 1955, the LDP lost out to the DPJ in lower house elections in August 2009. In recent decades, the LDP had become mired in recurrent scandals and a sclerotic intimacy with bureaucratic and other vested interests. Among those vested interests was the media industry, dominated by the big five newspaper groups—*Yomiuri*, *Asahi*, *Mainichi*, *Nihon Keizai* and *Sankei*—and national broadcaster NHK (McCargo & Lee, 2010).

"The dominance of the 'Big 5' newspaper groups in Japan was part-and-parcel of the LDP-led '1955 system,' which supported cozy and collusive relationships between the political and business elites," McCargo & Lee (2010) argue. That is why the DPJ has pushed ahead with media reforms including the purge of the press clubs. But according to freelance writer Yu Terawasa, the DPJ is quietly renegeing on its promises to break open the press clubs, revealing the continuing stranglehold on power and information exercised by the bureaucracy (McCargo & Lee, 2010).

FIGURE 1 Conduit Model of Media Relations



Source: Created on the basis of Inoue (2006, p. 27).

In fact, a primary obstacle for the DPJ is the strong resistance from not only the press clubs but also the bureaucrats. "The DPJ also faces opposition from bureaucrats, who have used the *kisha* clubs to channel the information they wanted the major news groups to publicize. This system also ensures the media are spoon-fed by the ministries, encouraging reporters to create non-adversarial relationships with government officials to avoid losing their privileged access to information" (Hongo, 2009).

These non-adversarial relationships inevitably discourage journalists at the press clubs from carrying out investigative reporting and make them reluctant to criticize authorities. It is simply the press club system that focuses journalists' thoughts and energies in directions that are unavoidably supportive of those in power, while constantly working to undermine whatever conceptions of journalistic ethics they may have (Gamble & Watanabe, 2004, p. 53). For public relations practitioners, what does this peculiar

media environment mean to their media relations activity?

4. Japanese Media Relations

4.1. Conduit

Media relations involves managing communication and relationships with the media; all the writers, editors, and producers who contribute and control what appears in the print, broadcast, and online news media (Cornelissen, 2008, p. 177). From a public relations standpoint, the media is important as channels for generating publicity and because their coverage of business news may influence many important stakeholders such as investors, customers, and employees. The media is therefore considered both a stakeholder and a conduit through which all other stakeholders can be reached.

As the conduit model of media relations (Figure 1) shows, when a company sends out a story, the media works as a channel. What needs to be remembered here is that the "real audience"

is not the media or the journalists, but the millions of people—both stakeholders and prospective stakeholders—who would be reading, watching or listening to the story through various media channels. Public relations practitioners therefore always need to keep the real audience in mind when managing relationships with the media.

To reach the real audience, practitioners should conduct research for targeting the right media and, thus, the right media audience. In Western countries, they do this by looking in their files to find out who covers their industry and the company specifically and then building better relationships with them. The same reporters typically cover the same beat for a period of time and have established relationships with the company either directly or indirectly in that process. While that process takes time, it generally yields better results than sending out a story to 300 reporters hoping that four or five may pick it up, with no idea who they are or what angle they are likely to take on the story (Argenti, 2003, p. 106-107).

In Japan, media relations practice presents a very different picture. Most practitioners do not bother doing such time-consuming media research because they can simply go to press clubs and hand out press releases. Sakae Ohashi, an expert on Japanese public relations and president of Kyodo Public Relations, explains: "Our method of contact with the press is peculiar to Japanese society. In the private sector each industry has its own press club, as does the steel industry, and so on. It is understood that all announcements, whether from government or industry, should come through the press clubs" (Gibson, 1998).

At each press club, the supervisor (*kanji*) decides whether press releases will be distributed or press conferences called. If the supervisor does not like the material, it never reaches club members. But if he does, it virtually guarantees

coverage in the media (Gibson, 1998). It is no wonder the press club is the key. For public relations practitioners, the press club works as a one-stop shop and satisfies their basic needs. All they have to do is to develop close working relationships with club journalists, particularly those assigned the job of club supervisor. The supervisor's job is assumed by club journalists by rotation.

The press club system is indeed convenient and has many advantages. However, these advantages can become disadvantages at the same time. First, press clubs make practitioners lazy. In Western countries, practitioners spend lots of time and energy to get around and cultivate relationships with the influential media. But in Japan, they do not have to do so because they can easily establish relationships with all major media outlets through press clubs. In addition, they do not necessarily have to build relationships with all club journalists. As mentioned above, it is the club supervisor who has the final say. Thus, as long as practitioners stay in touch with the supervisor, they can do their job. Their efforts end there.

Second, the most serious problem of press clubs from a media relations standpoint is that the system allows practitioners to do a job without media research. In short, Japanese media relations is not the practice of building relationships with the media but the practice of building relationships with the press club. In this practice, they do not have to conduct extensive media research to find out who covers what or what angle a particular journalist takes on his/her story.

There is little point in targeting any particular media or beat journalist because they are part of the press club and need to be dealt with through the club system and rules. There are many club rules and practices designed to ensure journalist cooperation. Those who break them can be punished or even expelled from the club by their

fellow journalists (Gamble & Watanabe, 2004, p. 57). Thus, what practitioners need to target is the press club as an institution, and not individual media or journalists. As a result, they lose sight of media audience completely.

As the conduit model of media relations shows, the "real audience" is not the media but the millions of people behind the media. Public relations practitioners can achieve their media relations goals only if they successfully reach out to the real audience. The Japanese press club system apparently discourages them to make efforts to work toward that end.

4.2. No Conflict of Interest

In Japan, business, government, media and public relations work together cooperatively. This is in stark contrast to the American adversarial relationship between the media and these other prominent social institutions (Gibson, 1998). In Western countries, the relationship is often described as adversarial because there is underlying conflict of interest between them.

Cutlip, et al. (2006, p. 270) explain: "The practitioner advancing a particular cause or organization stands in stark contrast to the journalist's drive to dig up news through good reporting and journalistic initiative." Cornelissen (2008, p. 182) concurs, adding that journalists have a negative opinion about public relations practitioners because they believe practitioners think about the needs of their companies first and less about what journalists need. In Japan, however, there is no such conflict of interest because Japan's mainstream news reporters are generally considered to be located between the job of a public relations practitioner and a full-fledged journalist (Gamble & Watanabe, 2004, p. 56).

Due to exclusive relationships developed through the Japanese press club system, government agencies and other news sources now

regard press clubs as "an integral part of their public relations activities" (Hirose, 1994). Not surprisingly, even journalists think the same way. One journalist from the Kabuto press club located in the Tokyo Stock Exchange says: "In the Kabuto club, we get a lot of product announcements and announcements about personnel changes. As far as the companies are concerned, we are their PR staff" (Freeman, 2000, pp. 80-81).

Are these non-adversarial relationships between the Japanese media and news sources healthy? On probable answer is that such relationships may run counter to public interest. Cutlip, et al. (2006, p. 270) argue: "Given the experience of at least a century, the adversarial relationship appears to serve the public interest and the needs of the public information system."

Past research show that public relations practitioners have a tendency to withhold negative information and are not always focused on issues of public interest (Cornelissen, 2008, p. 182). In an adversarial system, even information that would affect a corporation negatively must be released because both corporations and media are expected to carry out their social responsibilities (Kelly et al., 2002). Accuracy and fairness in press coverage does not result from reporters' work alone. Ultimately, the relationship between practitioners and journalists has an impact on the quality of news coverage about organizations (Cutlip, et al., 2006, p. 271). Unfortunately, the Japanese press club system does not appear to be instrumental in contributing toward that end, but is rather likely to continue working against the establishment of a healthy, adversarial relationship between the two.

5. Conclusion

Japanese media relations reflects the culture of journalism in this country. In Western countries, relationships between practitioners and journalists

have been cultivated on a long-term basis because the occupation of journalist is considered a lifelong career or profession. However, in Japan it is more often thought of as training or early career work, to be performed on one's way to becoming an editor and then, if successful, a manager in the company hierarchy (Gamble & Watanabe, 2004, p. 64).

It is not uncommon that Japanese journalists move one section to another, changing the beat every few years. A journalist who is assigned to the press club located in a government ministry may move to the financial industry press club the next year. This makes it difficult for practitioners to foster close, long-term relationships with journalists. Thus, press clubs continue to work as the single most important institution for Japanese media relations.

The press club system, however, is not immune to pressure for further reforms. It is likely to change significantly in the period ahead, due largely to the information innovation as well as media reform initiatives favored by the DPJ-led government. Abandoning the press club system, however, requires a more fundamental realignment of journalism and media relations practices in Japan.

Endnotes

- 1 The term constituency is used by Argenti & Forman (2002) in almost the same sense as a stakeholder. In this paper, the two terms are used interchangeably. Stakeholders are groups and individuals who can affect, or are affected by, the achievement of an organization's mission (Freeman, 1984, p. 52).
- 2 The *Yomiuri Shimbun* website, <http://adv.yomiuri.co.jp/yomiuri/n-busu/index.html> (accessed September 4, 2010).
- 3 The figures are from the websites of *Asahi*, http://adv.asahi.com/modules/media_kit/index.php/2010.html; *Mainichi*, <http://macs.mainichi.co.jp/now/section-b/01.html>; *Nihon Keizai*, <http://adweb.nikkei.co.jp/paper/data/mo/chapter1/01.html>; and *Sankei*, http://www.sankei-ad-info.com/chara/t-busuu_1.php. The websites were

accessed September 4, 2010.

- 4 Kyodo News, "FOCUS - Japan under EU pressure to end reporters club system," October 30, 2002.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 The Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association website, <http://www.pressnet.or.jp/english/> (accessed September 8, 2010).

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