

The Print Press Elite and the Government—How Independent Journalism in Japan Is Restrained by the Collaboration of the State and Information Cartels

In Japan, the hierarchical and “company-like” structure of the media landscape affects the work of news coverage in a way that leads to restrained access to information as well as journalistic self-censorship behavior. Since media serves as an intermediary between public and government, it plays a critical role in state-society relations (Freeman 17). Additionally, what Laurie A. Freeman calls *information cartels* dominate the media landscape in Japan, headed by an elite consisting of the five biggest national print media *Yomiuri*, *Asahi*, *Mainichi*, *Nikkei*, and *Sankei* (Freeman 24). Hence, the Japanese mainstream media is insofar of interest since those information cartels work as “[...] active collaborators with the state in a system of mutual convenience” (Freeman 28) and, thus, instead of actively shaping and critically questioning emerging news, the Japanese press rather adapts to the political elite’s agenda (Freeman 28). This is, furthermore, problematic concerning independent news coverage since the political landscape is hardly competitive and dominated by the prevailing conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) (The Economist 2012). Since the Cold War, the LDP and major mainstream media like Japan’s national broadcasting organization NHK, or the Japanese daily newspaper *Yomiuri Shinbun*, which has the world-wide highest circulation¹, determine the flow of information to the public discourse on Japanese war atrocities, or issues like the nuclear disaster of Fukushima in 2011. Whereas international media, for example, widely criticized the Fukushima incident, Japanese media reported barely anything but “that it was totally unforeseen and could not possibly have been predicted, but not to worry” (Covert 2013) during the first two weeks after the 3/11 disaster, repeating the words of Japanese authorities (Covert 2013). Furthermore, the Japanese government initiated the *Tokutei Himitsu Hogohō* (specific bill concerning the protection of state secrets) against terrorism in 2013. This bill, however, can be interpreted in such a broad way that the publication of state secrets could encompass sensitive issues like Fukushima as well. Thus, journalists who publish critical information on the issue might face severe charges which leads to self-censorship and, thus, affects independent research and news coverage. An additional factor worth examining is the Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO). TEPCO is the company that operates the Fukushima plant and spends huge monies on advertisements in media. This is only

¹ <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/newspapers-with-the-highest-circulation-in-the-world.html>

one example of companies in Japan that influence the public discourse through advertisement monies in e.g. newspapers or television since they are, therefore, hardly criticized by Japanese mainstream media. Altogether, the structures that determine Japanese media's self-censorship and restrain independent news coverage encompass a complex system of political, economic, and social ties with informal rules that can be traced back to the times of the Cold War. In this paper, I attempt to provide a rough introduction to the complexity of Japan's news system with the focus on how Japan's print press elite and *kisha*² clubs (Japanese press clubs) dominate, control, and regulate the access to information, and its implications for independent news coverage.

***Kisha* Clubs and Information Control**

The Japanese press is primarily dominated by what Freeman refers to as *information cartels* (14). They implicate informal institutionalized rules that affect the state-media-society relationship by controlling the access to information and the distribution of it. The *kisha* clubs (Japanese press clubs) play a critical role in the control of information flow, since they provide the press elite access to information concerning official institutions. There are two other institutions that concern the structures and implementation of information cartels in Japanese media and society—newspaper *kyōkai*³ (industry associations), and business groups in media called *keiretsu*⁴—, however, in this paper, I focus on *kisha* clubs, since they are at the top of the “information flow chain,”⁵ and present the direct link between official institutions and the media. In Brian Covert's article on Fukushima, he sums up the main aspects *kisha* clubs consist of:

“The *kisha* clubs are press clubs attached to various Japanese government agencies (from the highest levels of government down to local government agencies), political parties, major corporations, consumer organizations [...] and electric power companies. At last count there were an estimated 800 to 1,000 *kisha* clubs

² *kisha* (記者) lit.: reporter/journalist

³ *kyōkai* (協会) lit.: (industry) association

⁴ *keiretsu* (系列) lit.: group (of companies)

⁵ “Control of Information Flow in Japan” (Figure 1: Appendix 10)

nationwide. Membership in such clubs is mostly restricted to the big Japanese newspaper and broadcasting companies.” (2013)

One example of how such *kisha* clubs work and how they influence the access and flow of information, is depicted in Jake Adelstein’s work *Tokyo Vice* (2010). In his book, Adelstein describes his work as a journalist at the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, primarily covering crime at the police beat of Tokyo and nearby prefectures. While reporting his stories, he reveals details about press clubs and their structures concerning the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department (TMPD). The access to information about the TMPD’s activities basically runs through their public affairs section and three press clubs divided into newspaper, television, and radio and local newspaper (Adelstein 23). However, only daily newspapers like the *Yomiuri* or *Asahi* benefit from the direct connection to the police via their press clubs. Weekly newspapers or monthly magazines are not part of the press clubs and, hence, have to rely on the media *keiretsu*, which “[...] link the critical print media with other sources of news available to the public” (Freeman 22). Thus, direct information media receives from official institutions is only limited to a press elite that primarily consists of Japanese national daily print media, whereas especially magazines in Japan are heavily dependent on the transmission of information through the elite’s business groups and the newspaper association.

Another factor which influences the access of information are a set of informal rules and habits. In Japan, it is hard for journalists to interview public office holders. Information on, for example, ongoing investigations of the TMPD, or the Public Prosecutors Office are only transferred through *kisha* clubs of the respective institution (Shinoda 174/175). These information, however, are usually roughly outlined and specific details are not provided. Hence, in order to receive more profound and detailed information, journalists obtain long-term relationships with key sources that implicate a certain set of habits and attitudes. One example would be *youchi-asagake*⁶. Koichi Shinoda lays out this practice as journalists try “[...] to catch prosecutors either very early in the morning or very late at night to try to obtain information from them.” (175) He, furthermore, adds that *youchi-asagake* is not only common among crime reporters, but exercised by all journalists (Shinoda 175). As he describes the practice in further detail: “Wherever we

⁶*youchi-asagake* (夜討朝駆け) lit.: night-attack/early-morning attack; implicates the visit of reporters very early in the morning, or very late at night at a source’s home without prior notice

[journalists] are, from morning to night you can find us chasing police officers, politicians, bureaucrats and business heavyweights to gather information.” (175) In Jake Adelstein’s *Tokyo Vice*, the same practice, which he also names as *yomawari*⁷, is mentioned even more specifically. He points out that the *yomawari* becomes part of a journalist’s daily life in Japan and is essential in order to attain specific information (115). He even refers to a memo⁸ of a colleague that gives detailed advice on how to cultivate relationships with cops (77–79). Although the memo only pertains to crime reporters and their relations to key sources on the police beat, it gives a good example on how journalists, politics, and business relations in general work in Japan, and how their success depend on these rather long-term relationships. Compared to Western style journalism this is a significant distinction, since the way of information reception does not necessarily involve the cultivation of long-term relationship with resources, and access to more detailed information via means like interviews are easier to conduct (Freeman 21).

In general, Japanese journalism is dictated by informal rules and habits like the *yomawari* whereas the print press elite and *kisha* clubs dominate the control of information at the same time. How did these structures of information control in Japan, however, come into existent? To answer this question, it is worth taking a few steps back and look at developments during the Cold War period, and the time of Japan’s occupation by the US.

Media, Crime, Politics: Shōriki Matsutarō and the *Yomiuri Shinbun*

Japanese *kisha* clubs are one of the major factors which affect the information control of news. Another one, however, is the print press elite in Japan, primarily consisting of the nation’s five biggest daily newspapers: *Yomiuri*, *Asahi*, *Mainichi*, *Nikkei*, and *Sankei*. The history and development of the *Yomiuri*, for example, reveals the influence of several domestic and international actors on the control of information flow to the public through media. The net of actors and interests that shaped media structures affecting Japan’s news coverage today reemerged after the Second World War, when Japan was under American occupation and the Cold War was about to start. The practice of self-censorship, which was already adapted by editors and reporters

⁷ *yomawari* (夜回り) lit.: night watch; implicates early/late visit rounds to source’s homes in order to relationship cultivation

⁸ “A Memo to Whom It May Concern” (Figure 2: Appendix 11–12)

during the first half of the twentieth century, continued under the wing of the General Head Quarters (GHQ) of the American forces (Fuchs et al. Vol II.-301/302). Although the US's attempt to rebuild Japan as a role model for democracy in Asia, which implicated aspects such as free speech and independent media, their ideal contradicted with the reality of the Korean War, and the therefrom resultant Cold War. Thus, instead of furthering reconciliation through an apologetic Japanese politics, American as well as Japanese conservative domestic forces focused on strengthening key positions in Japanese business, politics, and media sectors in order to hamper communist and social movements, especially against critics of US occupation. Hence, strong anti-Communist personalities needed to be deployed to such key positions—like the president of the *Yomiuri Shinbun*, who has a great impact on shaping public opinion. As a result, GHQ allowed several Class-A war criminals like Kishi Nobusuke (岸信介)⁹, who would later become prime minister in 1957, or Shōriki Matsutarō (正力松太郎), to reenter the political and media stage with practically no charges against them (Neuhaus 127).

Shōriki Matsutarō, a former high-ranking TMPD official during the early 1920s, had already been president of the *Yomiuri* since prewar times until he got imprisoned after Japan's defeat in World War II (Covert 2013). While gradually becoming a major figure in the media and entertainment world, he amplified his anti-communist agenda through the *Yomiuri Shinbun* and, thus, had a great impact on public opinion during wartimes. When Shōriki was found guilty as an Class-A war criminal due to his high position in media and several governmental propaganda organizations, his imprisonment only lasted for less than two years. During the late 1940s, the US, wary of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rise in China and the upcoming of the Cold War, changed its policy of promoting democracy in Japan toward the attempt of using the nation as a bulwark against communism in Asia (Fuchs et al. Vol. I-282/283). In order to do so, American occupation forces sought to strengthen Japanese right-wing organizations (Covert 2013). Shōriki, who was already being known for his anti-communist agenda and still upheld connections to the political right, thus, turned out to be a suitable figure in media to oppress any kind of dissent on Japanese conservative politics, or critics of the American occupational discourse. Hence, going

⁹ Japanese names are usually addressed with the last name followed by the first name. Thus, the example of “Kishi Nobusuke” refers to “Kishi” as the last name, and “Nobusuke” as the first name. Japanese characters are added in brackets to clarify the actual writing of the person's names in Japanese since there are several possibilities to transfer them into Japanese characters.

with the US's "Red Purge"-policy, Shōriki Matsutarō was reinstated as president of the *Yomiuri Shinbun* in the early 1950s. From then on, he gradually expanded his influence on public opinion and in politics, launching Japan's first commercial television network Nippon Television Network (NTV) in 1953, and entering Japan's Diet in the mid-1950s, where he became a LDP-cabinet member and was appointed president of Japan's Atomic Energy Commission (The Economist 2012).

Hence, shifts toward strengthening conservative, anti-communist forces did not only pertain the nation's media sector, but also business and politics in Japan. Thus, for example, even criminal organizations like the *yakuza*¹⁰ benefitted from the perception of a communist menace. As Neuhaus points out, *yakuza* provided two major gains from prewar times: additional manpower, and a conservative, rightist ideology (125/126). Due to the "Red Purge", when GHQ supported the Yoshida administration in their attempts to remove Communist Party members from their jobs on a large scale, public uncertainty and opposition aroused, especially among day laborers and dock workers. In order to counter violent outbursts, as well as to fill gaps in the economy due to the sudden reduction of enterprise workers, *yakuza* presented a welcome opportunity to American occupation officials to suppress strikes and strengthen Japan's economy while supporting right-wing associations. Hence, "[...] in some cases organized crime groups could take on functions normally reserved for state authorities." (Neuhaus 126) As Brian Covert, sums the situation up, "Japanese ultra-rightist organizations and even the *yakuza* [...] were becoming useful tools for the US occupation authorities in suppressing the growing social movement of organized labor and liberal political dissent, including in the Japanese media." (2013) The favoritism of anti-communist forces, furthermore, enabled organized crime, business, and politics to intermingle in some cases and led to the reinforcement of right-wing organizations. One example, therefore, would be the establishment of the LDP in 1955, who were largely supported by *yakuza* actors, or those with close ties to the organization, as well as Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke (Neuhaus 127–129). Nobusuke's ties to powerful right-wing figures connected to the world of organized crime enabled his rise back to power after he was released from Sugamo prison without a trial, and reveal the reemergence of the intermingling between business, politics, and crime during the 1950s.

¹⁰ Japanese organized crime syndicates, also referred to as *bōryokudan* (暴力団)

Although organized crime and politics have changed during the last few decades, remnants of right-wing enforcement policies during the time of the Cold War still influence Japanese media, politics, and economy (Neuhaus 131). Especially the resurgence of conservative right-wing powers under the politics of current Prime Minister Abe Shinzō's, who is also Kishi Nobusuke's grandson, leads to an increased restraint on independent news coverage. Furthermore, the self-imposed censorship from wartimes and the postwar period is still perceivable among the Japanese press and publishers today (Fuchs et al. Vol. II-301). One recent example, therefore, would be the 3/11 nuclear disaster of Fukushima and the restrictions of independent journalism by political, and economic interest groups that followed the incident.

Fukushima 2011: The Issue of the *Tokutei Himitsu Hogohō* and Its Implications for Independent Journalism

When in May 11, 2011 the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster occurred, overseas and domestic media's reports on the incident differed widely (Covert 2013). Whereas Japanese media initially remained almost silent and basically repeated politicians' reassuring words "not to worry" to the public, international media like BBC News, for example, criticized the government's rhetoric. How come that Japan's bigger news companies like *Yomiuri*, or *Asahi* remain barely critical about the Fukushima incident and its implications? The *kisha* club system, major key players in the interface of politics, nuclear industry, and media like Shōriki, as well as the role of electronic power companies concerning the promotion of nuclear energy present one of the most critical factors with regard to the issue of restricted news coverage.

As Freeman already pointed out, information flow in Japan is strongly controlled by the print press elite as well as the *kisha* clubs (24). Journalists who attempt independent research detached from the media system's policies often risk opposition by fellow colleagues, or even collective consequences for their company, which often leads to self-restraint (Covert 2013). With the conservative and LDP-related *Yomiuri Shinbun* as one of the leading press companies, critical news coverage on governmental rhetoric and actions are expected to be rather reserved than critical. With regard to nuclear politics in Japan, for example, self-censorship and promotion of nuclear energy goes back to the time when Shōriki Matsutarō was a powerful figure in media and politics. He used his high position to further the implementation and use of atomic energy while being

supported by Japanese as well as American conservative forces (The Economist 2012). Close relations between the atom energy industry and media is, furthermore, revealed by the fact that electronic power companies which are also operators of nuclear plants, like TEPCO, spend huge advertisement monies on promoting nuclear energy in major print and broadcast media companies (Covert 2013). Hence, as financial supporters of the press elite, energy companies are hardly criticized.

One of the most recent restraints imposed on independent news coverage, however, is presented by the implementation of the *Tokutei Himitsu Hogohō* (“state secrets protection bill”) in 2013. As Mizushima Asaho (水島朝穂) explains in his statement on this special bill, there are several issues pertaining its transparency (accessed: Sept. 2018). Although the bill is considered as supplement to already existing laws and agreements concerning the protection of state secrets as well as the prevention of terrorist activities and leaking highly sensitive information that could pose a threat to national security, the *Tokutei Himitsu Hogohō* contains sections that are not clear on what falls in the category of “state secrets.” It, furthermore, allows state officials and prosecutors to easily violate personal rights of investigated personnel and civilians. Since definitions of what falls under a “state secret” and pertains matters of national security are very broad, and the consequences for those leaking information to the public are quite severe—up to ten years of imprisonment in worst case—it leads to the issue of increased restrained news coverage on governmental actions and politics (McCurry 2014). Concerning the Fukushima nuclear case, the *Tokutei Himitsu Hogohō* affects independent journalism in a way that leads to increased self-censorship. As Brian Covert depicts the situation:

“Now that Japan’s state secrets bill has become law, leaking sensitive information concerning Fukushima could technically be considered a crime, both for the whistleblower who leaks it and for any journalist who reports it. The extended ‘war on terror’ has now joined hands with ‘atoms for peace,’ with truth becoming the first casualty.” (2013)

The Fukushima accident in 2011 led to a reemergence of already existing issues of transparency, and the control of information flow by a press elite that implicates restrictions and self-censorship behavior concerning independent journalism (Fuchs et al. Vol.II-316).

It reveals constraints of news coverage due to hierarchical structures of media organizations, and the interests of business, politics, and media institutions that meet at the top of it.

Conclusion

In this paper, the aim is to provide a rough overview of the structures in Japanese society that have a restraining impact in independent journalism. The prevalence of information cartels and *kisha* clubs in the media environment and the control of information flow by the print press elite in Japan is still present today. These factors affect the thoroughness of news coverage, especially concerning issues of politics as pointed out in the example of the Fukushima accident in 2011 and its coverage by Japanese media. Furthermore, remnants of political and economic structures from Cold War times influence the character of news today, e.g. the “soft criticism” of electronic companies or the government by conservative newspapers like the influential *Yomiuri Shinbun*. Additionally, with a dominant LDP in politics, who hold close ties to major news companies like the *Yomiuri*, as well as the support of the current administration of Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (who is a LDP member and consequently chairman of the party), conservative and nationalist ideologies are rather promoted and the access to information to the public likely to be further restricted. Hence, the disintegration of hierarchical structures in media, business, and politics in order to facilitate independent journalism in Japan are confronted with issues of self-censorship behavior and political as well as legal restrictions, especially with consequences implicated by laws like the *Tokutei Himitsu Hogohō*. The example of Fukushima has revealed how difficult it is to dismantle the connections of Japanese media, the government, and nuclear energy business. As Covert points out, disengaging the Japanese press from its ties to nuclear power companies as well as dissolving the *kisha* club system is a necessary step to take for providing more transparency on issues like Fukushima, however, due to the history and institutional roots of the system not an easy task (2013).

Appendix

Figure 1: Control of Information Flow in Japan based on: “Figure 2. Key Connections within Japan’s Media Networks” (Freeman 22)

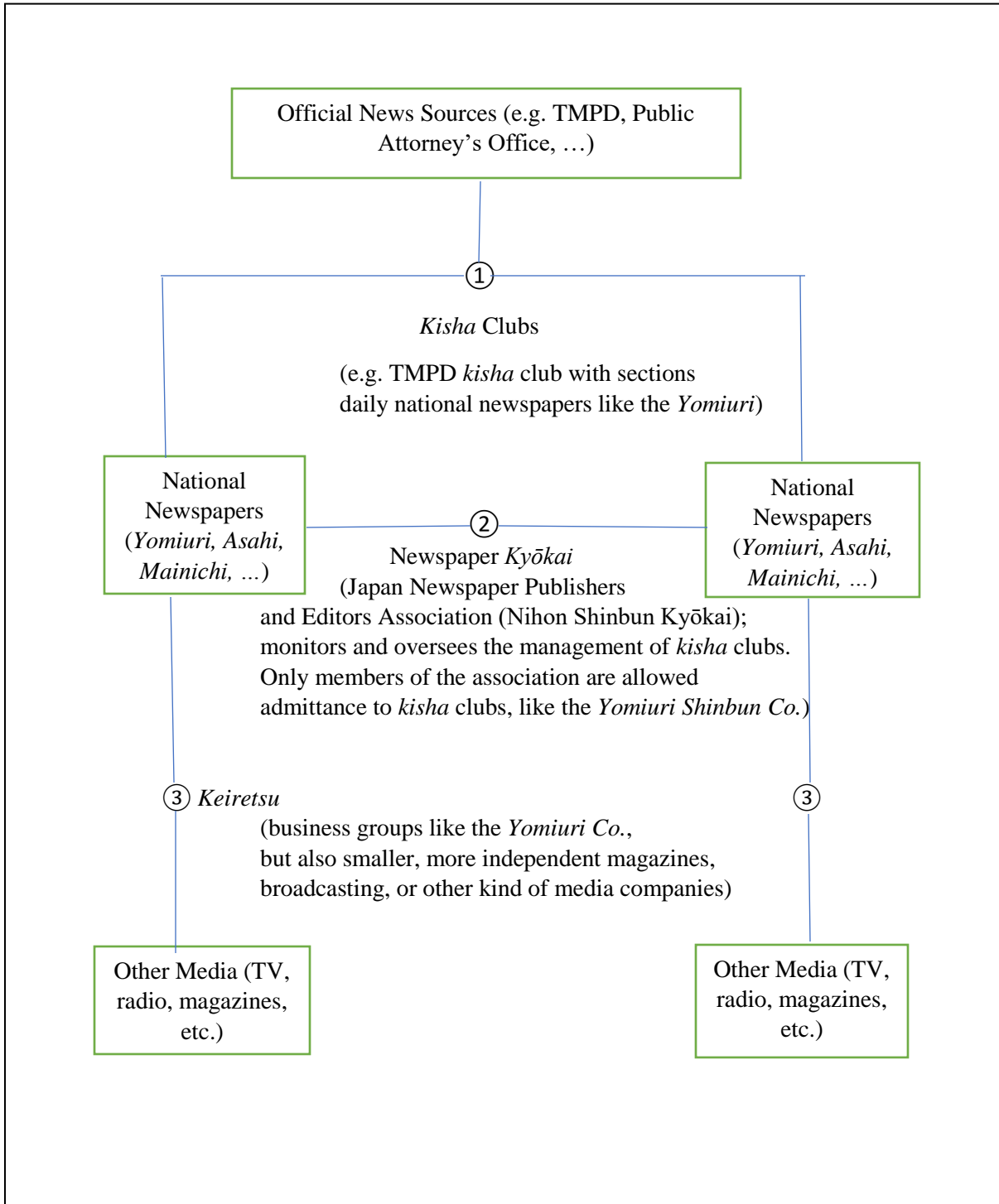


Figure 2: “A Memo to Whom It May Concern” (Adelstein 77–79):

“[...] It may have been ten years since I was last on the crime beat, but let me say this: The TMPD Club team is capable of making great war plans but not winning the battle. Don’t take this advice from your boss, but take it as advice from your elder and a senior reporter – the job is harder than you think it is. If you just mechanically make the rounds or get by on the *Yomiuri* name, only one or two cops out of ten will leak anything to you. Maybe.

If you just aimlessly visit cops at their homes during the evening, you won’t get them to say anything. Anybody can get the addresses of detectives from their senpai [senior reporters] and go to the house, wait a couple of hours, and, when they come home, butter them up and occasionally prime the pump with tickets to a Giants baseball game. If it were just a matter of doing that over and over, even a first-year reporter at *Jiji Press* could do it.

I’m aware that each person on the beat tries to shore up the sections he/she is in charge of. I know that you are figuring out which cop is worth bringing into the fold, but the issue is *what* are you doing to get that cop to be a source? What are you doing to distinguish yourself from other reporters? [...]

Do you take care of the cop you want to crack? Have you asked him his birthday, place of birth, family lineage, the birthdays of his wife and kids, his wedding anniversary, when his kids start school, whether they have found a job, what holidays or special events the family has coming up? Do you say proper greetings on those occasions or, even better, bring a present?

Do you take small gifts when you call on the cops in the evening? [...] Go to Daimaru in Tokyo station or someplace like that and buy a regional food or drink from the area where you were born. Then tell your cop buddy, ‘I had someone back home send this.’ Or ‘I brought this back from a trip for you.’ Those kind of lies are very effective. And timing is important. If you take him a warm meat pastry or a hot sweet-bean pastry on a cold day, all the better. If the cop doesn’t come home, give it to his wife or girlfriend or mistress. Tell her, ‘Here, if it gets cold it doesn’t taste good.’ This at least gets her to open the front door, and that’s always an important first step.

Do you ask the cops to get food or something to drink with you? Do you make efforts to get the police to ride in the hired limousine with you? On a rainy day or when the snow falls, this is the perfect opportunity to send them from their house to the train station or vice versa.

Do you randomly visit cops in the morning? Do you take copies of the *Yomiuri* to cops who don't subscribe to the *Yomiuri*? Even if you just spend 100 yen [about a dollar] to give the guy a can of coffee or a sports drink, that's enough to set you apart from the pack.

If one of your cop buddies is sick, do you take the time to visit him in the afternoon? If you just go visit him in the evening, that's about the level of a first-year reporter for Yamagata [Hickville] Television. If the wife or kids of the cops have a cold, buy some cold medicine, some orange juice, and take it to the house.

When you have the night shift, do you always let your cop buddy know that 'Hey, I'm up all night at the office, so if anything interesting goes on, give me a buzz'? If your pal is on the night shift at the head office, take him a snack and bullshit for a while. Instead of complaining that you can't get through to the police when a new case breaks, make an effort to get in good with the public affairs guys so you are the first one to catch the story.

[...] If all you do is complain, you could have ten years on the police beat and still not win against the TV reporters. If you don't know your cop's birthday, use the branch offices, senior reporters, even employees at the local ward office to find out. Public utility companies also know the names and phone numbers of cops and where they have moved recently.

[...]

Hanging out with your family and their family at the same time is the ultimate way to cultivate a source. Families play together, stay together.

Have you ever taken your wife and kids with you on a Saturday and stopped by 'because we were in the neighborhood'?

Do you get your sources to introduce their *kohai* [younger officer friends and protégés] to you? If you know a cop who's going to retire this year, shamelessly become friends and get him to introduce his remaining buddies."

List of Works Cited

Adelstein, Jake. *Tokyo Vice*. Corsair. London: 2010.

Covert, Brian. *Fukushima: An Update from Japan*. Project Censored. December 15, 2013. <https://projectcensored.org/fukushima-update-japan/>

Economist, The. *Matsutaro Shoriki—Japan's Citizen Kane*. December 22, 2012. <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2012/12/22/japans-citizen-kane>

Freeman, Laurie Anne. *Closing the Shop: Information Cartels and Japan's Mass Media*. Princeton University Press. 2000.

Fuchs, Eckhardt/Kasahara, Tokushi/Saaler, Sven (eds.). *A New Modern History of East Asia*. Vol. I & II. V&R unipress. Göttingen. 2018.

McCurry, Justin. *Abe Defends Japan's Secrets Law that Could Jail Whistleblowers for 10 Years*. The Guardian. December 10, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/10/japan-state-secrets-law-security-dissent>

Mizushima, Asaho.¹¹ 「特定秘密保護法」の問題性—原則と例外の逆転へ¹². Accessed: September 13, 2018. https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/adv/wol/opinion/gover-eco_131111.html

Neuhaus, Dolf-Alexander. *Right Wing Organizations, Organized Crime, and the State in Japan – Historical Discourses and Developments*, in: Blancke, Stephan (ed.). *East Asian Intelligence and Organised Crime*. Reihe Geheime Nachrichtendienste, Bd. 9. Dr. Köster Verlag. Berlin. 2015. pp. 117–132.

¹¹ Professor for Japanese Law at the Department of Law, Waseda University, Tokyo.

¹² “Tokutei Himitsu Hogohō” No Mondaisei—Gensoku To Reigai No Gyakuten-e; Problem Statement on the “Special State Secrets Protection Bill”—The Reversion of Principle and Exception.

Shinoda, Koichi. *Organized Crime in Japan—Yakuza and Company*, in: Blancke, Stephan (ed.). *East Asian Intelligence and Organised Crime*. Reihe Geheime Nachrichtendienste, Bd. 9. Dr. Köster Verlag. Berlin. 2015. pp. 169—179.