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200205156

## Key characteristics of English language newspapers in Japan

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to outline briefly some of the significant characteristics of English language newspapers that are available nationwide in Japan. Through selective examination of content and commentary on how this, and their varying styles, contribute to what could be called their overall "atmosphere," these characteristics emerge.

### Introduction

The newspaper industry in Japan is experiencing some interesting new developments, while at the same time undergoing some of the kinds of changes that have been forced on many Japanese businesses by the protracted national economic downturn (the "post-bubble" economy). This forms an important background factor to the existing conditions for media publishing.

### *The International Herald Tribune / Asahi Shimbun*

One of the more compelling recent developments in the English language newspaper industry in Japan is the merging of the *International Herald Tribune* (edited from Paris, and sourced mainly from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*) with the *Asahi Evening News* (largely translated into English from the Japanese *Asahi Shimbun*).

Since April of this year these two previously separate publications are now sold as one paper, with the *IHT* making up the first 20 or more pages, followed by the *Asahi* which is variously between six and 10 pages. At the time of writing, it is too soon to make any definitive long-term conclusions about the new, combined "product" but there are some notable features which can be observed.

Certainly, there are some promising early signs that the *Asahi* may have

moved towards more serious investigative journalism (particularly on work-place and employment issues) whereas it had in the past often tended towards the typically "lighter" kind of content that one or two of the other Japanese English newspapers have also generally favoured. In fact, on only its second day of being jointly marketed, the *Asahi* broke a story concerning a secret "slush fund" in the government-funded Japan Nuclear Cycle Development Institute.

On top of this, at the end of that first week it pointed the finger at apparent neglect and fraud by Japanese coast guard officers. Since the merger then, the *Asahi* has adopted what is certainly a more skeptical tone and is giving more prominence to articles that delve into topics which are routinely ignored by its competitors.

There is now more space given to pieces that are directly critical of aspects of Japan, in some cases written by foreigners. A significant part of the *Asahi's* agenda then is to at least appear to be pro-reform, and is typified by its daily "Faces of a New Japan" which features individuals who are attempting change in traditionally change-resistant organisations.

In its opinion/point of view columns it has been progressive enough to begin to allow Korean writers to contribute regularly (a unique development in mainstream publications). The emergence of these factors may indeed prove to assist the paper in lifting its daily circulation of 8.3 million yet higher, augmented by its English language web site which claims to average around 60,000 hits per day). Like its competitors, though, the *Asahi* still indulges in revenue-raising content that blurs editorial pieces together with paid advertising. The two-page "Weekend" section it carries on Fridays combines "information" with prices and other details on everything from restaurants to clothes or "events," all packaged neatly into one easy-to-read format. It remains to be seen if they will continue this practice, but at least in the short term it looks likely to be too big a financial temptation for the managers of Japan's English language newspapers to ignore.

It must be said, however, that when it comes to the issue of power-sharing, the new format of the *IHT/Asahi* has clearly put the Japanese paper in a secondary, supporting role. While previously running to a length in excess of 20 pages, it has now become merely a six to 10-page "insert" which is effectively a part of the *IHT*, functioning as a kind of "native extension" rather than an entity in its own right. It has been largely subsumed by its adoptive US "brother," which runs somewhat contrary to its claim that it would maintain its separate voice after the partnership. To a certain degree it could appear that the *Asahi* has in fact been able to cling to its identity, as evidenced by the overall concentration it gives to Japanese stories, but the shrunken size of the new *Asahi* is an indication that it has been notably emasculated. It may indeed find it difficult to reclaim the prominence it once had.

Since this same "merger," however, there has been no discernible change to the *IHT*, compared with its previous incarnation. Its "America-centric" content has continued unaltered to the extent that US college basketball results can still make the front page of a weekday edition, and international news that does not directly affect the States is only sometimes covered in detail.

Even the Asia-Pacific news pages are dominated by a US perspective and framed by that country's perceived interests. This is not surprising given the fact that its articles are mainly written first by staff writers working for the two American city newspapers that they are originally sourced from. It is here that a "typical" reader of the *IHT* can be imagined, as the creators and marketing department of the paper most probably have done. The advertising, the classifieds, and other content seem to be speaking to someone who is a North American in excess of 30 years of age, but below 50 (and keen to be mentally younger than this); probably male; monetarily well-off (or aspiring to be so); and working in the sectors of finance or technology. The tone of the paper is broadly consistent with some characteristics of its target reader, being variously earnest or even somewhat flippant depending on the particular columnist. Apparently because it is "popular" (the editors claim) the Ann Landers "agony-aunt" column is still continued with all its home-spun simplicity.

### **The Japan Times**

Arguably the most comprehensive of daily English language newspapers available is the *Japan Times*, which also publishes a lengthy weekly edition. Using Reuters, Associated Press, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, it gives a wider, more detailed coverage of current international events than its competitors who tend to concentrate predominantly on the United States.

Unusually for this country's mainstream media, the *Japan Times* takes a strong interest in environmental issues, both in reporting ongoing stories and giving column space to "native English" feature writers who also analyse developments in semi-related fields like the sciences. Additionally, there are a number of "celebrity" or "personality" journalists who have regular spots in music and sports.

In recent times this paper has given a prominent place to stories on the homeless or unemployed (who are rarely if ever mentioned elsewhere) and a woman writer has begun to share the national soccer league column, which may well be a "first" in the Japanese media. The *Japan Times'* local content is centred on Tokyo, while its non-news features are relatively "highbrow" such as a commentary on "sake" (rice wine), restaurant reviews, or overseas fashion articles.

Another unique element of this paper is its "National Day" features which cover a full page or more. This is often actually little more than an extremely

dull repetition of platitudes about the "close relationship" or "friendly ties" between Japan and the country of the day, officially written by the ambassador or a cultural attache. Just as often it is a subtle plea for Japanese foreign investment. As with most of the broadsheets on the news stand, the *Japan Times* focuses heavily on politics. More exactly, it tends to give a front-page placement to the itinerary or schedule of the Japanese Prime Minister to any government financial or corruption scandal (of which there have been many recently) and to any election results from countries in which Japan has an interest.

Generally, this paper has the feel of a solid and reliable publication, succeeding with a kind of quality content that creates an image that is more likely to appeal to older readers, compared with its rivals.

#### *The Daily Yomiuri*

One of the alternatives to the *Japan Times* is the *Daily Yomiuri*. Despite the recession of the last decade it has grown from an eight page paper into a genuine competitor in the two major markets of Tokyo and the Kansai (centred around Osaka, Kobe, and Kyoto). This expansion was largely due to a major cash injection early in its development, but undoubtedly the reduction in competition with the upcoming folding of the tabloid *Mainichi Daily News* will also assist its market share.

The bulk of this newspaper is translated from its Japanese language "parent," the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, and this is apparent from even a cursory reading. Aside from the regular grammatical errors, there are frequent examples of sentence structure that betray the fact that they have originated from a Japanese text. Beginning a paragraph with an often out of context "Nonetheless," or "On the other hand," as in one recent article, are hallmarks of formal Japanese speech. Unlike the *Japan Times* there are no "native English" journalists writing for the *Yomiuri* and this clearly affects the tone of authenticity for a section of readers.

Their foreign news, including business reports and sport, is exclusively sourced from Reuters and Associated Press and therefore contains a change in "voice" when compared with the rest of the paper. To illustrate this at times jarring quality of the *Yomiuri* it is worth looking at some examples. In an apparent attempt to broaden its appeal outside the Tokyo demographic it has introduced a Kansai and West Japan section on Wednesdays, called "Kansai to the core." In one issue from March a staff writer was allocated an entire half page (on page nine) to investigate whether people mainly stand on the left or right of the escalator in selected towns of the region. As in a standard Japanese "presentation," photographs were taken, surveys were done, and a semi-historical explanation of the phenomenon was made. The piece was titled "East-West rivalry can have its ups and downs" and below it was a separate story

about subway graffiti in the city of Osaka. In another notable case, a colour photo on page three of the same edition depicted two large walruses clasping "alpine horns" between their front fins, seemingly blowing into them through their mouths. Their human trainer was shown standing in front of the creatures making "conducting" movements with her arms. Behind, in a glass-fronted pool, were three Beluga dolphins with their heads above the water supposedly "singing." The text, headed "New band makes waves," reassured the reader that the members of the "Sea Animal Band" were initially nervous of each other but that "after an intensive 30-day training program the animals are [now] working as a team."

It is debatable of course whether a Western editor would have printed this somewhat grotesque and disturbing story (which is clearly being included only because there is a visual image to accompany it) given concerns that arise from an animal rights and cruelty point of view (let alone good taste). While newspapers all around the world do run these kinds of articles, in this case it has the effect of clashing with the attempt in the *Yomiuri's* opening pages at appearing to be a serious publication. The style of any paper is at least partly set by the subjects it chooses to focus on outside of news and current affairs, and the *Yomiuri* in this sense is a "lightweight" newspaper that frequently borders on infotainment.

Here then, it is also apparent that a significant amount of the *Yomiuri's* content has a distinct "human interest" slant. Many of its stories could justifiably be called "soft news," relying on anecdotal material, as opposed to an examination of current events which might have an abstract quality to them, or those that may highlight ongoing problems that exist below the surface of Japan's supposedly harmonious society. The mental atmosphere of the paper is one where people, not issues, are newsworthy. In a recent weekend issue this newspaper did, however, have two articles (positioned on half of page eight) that dealt with gay males in Japan. Significantly though, they dealt almost entirely with foreign residents. By leaving out all but token references to Japanese homosexuals there was the inference that "gayness" is largely something that is significant for non-Japanese only. Interestingly, this piece was squeezed between two almost full-page commentaries on the adverse health affects of pre-packaged food and soft drinks. It is clear that in this unexceptional issue of the *Daily Yomiuri*, the editors are of the belief that the most weighty concerns for the nation are these topics, and not, for example, matters of education, international relations, the justice system, or even the environment.

The *Yomiuri* therefore is probably the best English language newspaper for getting an impression of what kinds of subjects occupy the minds of some Japanese people (or at the very least, what they are prepared to canvass in a public forum). Equally, it is illuminating in that what its editors put under the headings of Opinion and Commentary/Analysis is often little more than jour-

nalist's exhortation for the government, bureaucrats, or business to do "a better job." Nowhere is there any real attempt to outline an alternative to current practices. This is one of the malaises that all newspapers in Japan suffer from, to varying degrees – both Japanese and English language.

**Author**

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