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# Whose Voices Are Reflected in the News?: An Analysis of Newspaper Articles on the Comfort Women Issue in 2013

MITANI Fumie\*

## Overview

Recently, the word “populism” has been frequently referred to in the news. Populists are politicians who advocate anti-elitism and criticize existing political forces for representing established interests, rather than people’s. To gain the support of the people, populists assert that they represent “true” people. The media unconsciously helps to support them to maintain their assertion. Sometimes, populists gain media attention through their bold activities and, often, they are labeled as outsiders in the established political world. The media interviews the populists and reports on them; in this manner, the media becomes involved in populist politics.

There are populist politicians in Japan, as well. They assert that they are fighting against the established forces, whom they call the resistance forces, and gain people’s support by raising an appeal for reformation. In their activities, such politicians claim that no one, except themselves, represents the people, and criticize the media and established political forces for not representing people’s voices. This tendency raises the following question: how does the Japanese media listen to and report on people’s voices in the context of populist politics?

Many recent studies on journalists’ sources document their significant reliance on institutional sources, such as political elites. As a result, the media tends to adopt a top-down perspective of the world and citizens are often left in academic debates, despite the increasing criticism of the media by populists that it does not reflect the people’s voices. Research shows that citizens are relatively passive sources in general news reporting. Moreover, they are often characterized as apolitical actors. Although research on populism has increased in recent years and suggests that “the people” is its fundamental concept, it leaves out essential questions such as who are “the people” in news reporting. Hence, it is urgent to analyze and examine who are considered “the people” and why they are considered so from a journalist’s perspective.

\*Assistant Professor at the Department of Journalism, College of Law, Nihon University.

To conduct this inquiry, this study analyzes how the Japanese media reported people's voices in the context of populist politics and describes characteristics of the Japanese media. This study focuses on the role played by citizens as sources. Accordingly, it examines news sources pertaining to some of the controversial remarks made by a populist by analyzing 539 stories that were reported over two months in 2013. This study comprises a case study on Toru Hashimoto, the populist mayor of Osaka, who expressed his opinion on the issue of comfort women in 2013. His remarks on this issue attracted much public attention and were extensively reported by the media nationwide. This study examines how the media reflected people's voices regarding the mayor's remarks.

## Populism and People's Voices

### *Introduction to Populism*

What is populism? It is difficult to provide a single definition for populism, since the definition depends on the situation being analyzed. In the European context, populism refers to anti-immigration attitudes or xenophobia, whereas, in the Latin American context, populism refers to the politics of clientelism. Although it is difficult to develop a common definition, there are certain characteristics of populism that are shared across contexts, such as direct communication with people, anti-elitism, and anti-pluralism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018: 14-17; Canovan, 1999: 7). According to this perspective, liberalism (which refers to protection of minorities' rights) conflicts with populism, which is one of the reasons why populism is considered a political/social problem in liberal democratic states. However, populism emerges from democracy itself. Democracy has two faces: the ideal one, whereby it provides remedies to people's problems by listening to them, and the pragmatic one, which refers to rational political operations. Because populism emerges from these conflicting faces, it is considered as a "dark side" of democracy (Canovan, 1999: 3).

In this analysis, populism is defined as a communication strategy with three main characteristics. First, a "populist" appeals to people that there is no one except him or her who represents the people. Second, he or she provides people with a dichotomy and refers to other political forces as "enemies" and criticizes them. Third, his or her purpose can be realized only by defeating the enemies. In addition, the populist has the capability to communicate with the people, uses a tabloid style of language, and displays mediagenic traits (Mazzoleni, 2003: 5).

Since populists criticize the media due to its elitist attitudes, it is important to question how the media reports on the public's opinions on populist politics. Does the media ignore people's voices? How does the media construct the people through its coverage? To address these questions, this study analyzes the remarks made by Mayor Hashimoto on the issue of comfort women in 2013.

Japanese politician Toru Hashimoto is considered one of the most famous populist politicians in Japan, since he meets the three aforementioned criteria of a populist. In his election campaign, Hashimoto criticized the Osaka prefectural government that the latter could not stop the wastage of money by the former governor and mentioned that, on being elected, he would make Osaka's budgets healthier from the perspective of the prefecture's citizens. He criticized the media and regarded it as the enemy because the media did not satisfy the needs of Mayor Hashimoto as one of the "ordinary people." Although Mayor Hashimoto originally admitted that the media coverage was accurate, he later criticized the traditional media for not reporting the "truth" only after his remarks had received public attention. Consequently, he refused to conduct a press conference for several days. In addition, he directly communicated with the people through social networking services, such as Twitter. This study examines the media coverage on the controversial remarks made by a populist Toru Hashimoto to clarify how the media reflects people's voices.

### ***Who Are the People?***

The concept of people does not merely indicate citizens or constituents (Canovan, 1999: 5). Instead, the word people is a political symbol whose meaning depends on the struggle over meanings. In this sense, the people as "empty signifiers" is constructed (Laclau, 2005). In a populist's discourse, people are classified into three categories (Canovan, 1999: 5). The first category is "united people." The populist suggests that people are divided by the existing political forces and that "we" as the "people" need to be united and convey our thoughts to the government. The second category is "our people." In this case, people who do not belong to "us" are considered "them," for instance, immigrants and refugees. Such a discourse is formed by distinguishing them from us. The third category is "ordinary people." The discourse is formed such that only the populist himself or herself represents the will of the ordinary people, who are different from the highly educated elites with authoritative liberal ideas.

The people appealed to by populists do not include the media. Indeed, populists criticize the media. They suggest that the media does not listen to the people and, instead, the media works for the elites. As mentioned in the next Section, the media tends to reinforce the existing order because of its elite-centered sources. When populists fight the existing order and social norms, the media tends to represent populists as deviating agents or to refrain from reporting them. As a result, the media unconsciously helps to maintain the status quo (Mazzoleni, 2003: 11). In addition, since populists attempt to appeal to people without using the media and to directly reflect the will of people in politics, the populists consider the media to be a hindrance to their communication with the people. As mentioned in this section, the people whom the populists appeal to are constructed through their discourses. Then,

how does the media construct the people?

### *Journalists' Sources*

To clarify the media's representation about the people, it is helpful to examine the source used by a journalist for news-making. There is much research literature that examines journalists' sources. For example, a journalist plays the role of a gatekeeper in selecting information for news-making (Gans, 1979) and, sometimes, an "index" of political elites (Bennett, 1990), since such selections of news sources are a routine aspect of journalistic activities (Tuckman, 1978). However, due to technological advancement, the Internet helps journalists to obtain information easily. On the one hand, they can quickly gather a significant amount of information, whereas, on the other, they should scrutinize the information collected from the Internet. In any case, a journalist obtains information through traditional means, such as interviews, or through the Internet. In addition, the decline in the press's credibility is a serious issue in Western countries and Japan. Today, a journalist should listen to citizens and report social/political problems to the public more consciously than ever before. Therefore, the present-day journalistic routine is completely different from the one that was prevalent at the time these studies were conducted (Gans, 1979; Tuckman, 1978; Bennett, 1990).

Although the media environment is completely different today, earlier studies have revealed that the media does not express the voice of citizens. For example, a study on the news sources during the election campaigns in the United Kingdom (2009-2017) indicated that journalists used public opinion to serve their narratives in related reporting. Rather than reflecting substantive public opinion, the media represented public opinion in a misleading manner (Cushion, 2018: 654). Although longitudinal research reveals that the use of "vox pop" has increased over the years (Kleemans et al., 2017: 475), many studies conclude that journalists tend to depend on institutional, rather than citizen, sources.

In Japan, only limited research has been conducted on news sources. Kabashima (1990) investigated the accessibility of organizations/institutions to journalists of national newspapers. This research revealed that social movements/pressure groups had access to newspaper journalists. On the other hand, Elis Krauss (2006) illustrated that Japanese news programs that were aired during the 1990s mostly reported bureaucratic voices because these programs were dependent on the press club or "Kisha" club<sup>1</sup> for their sources in television news. In addition, even though there were massive social movements against forced lawmaking, news programs mainly reported politicians' voices and "indexed" Congressional debates (Mitani, 2015). Moreover, a comparative survey of 11 countries on sources in political news revealed that television news on public issues emphasized the government and ruling party and reflected vox pop only 12% of the time (Curran et al., 2017: 826). These studies show that the Japanese media tends to report voices of

political sources more than those of social movements/pressure groups and citizens, despite knowing the latter's voices. Even though a survey on vox pop was conducted (Curran et al., 2017), studies did not examine the construction of people in populist politics. To what extent are their voices reflected in the news when the media reports the issues related to a populist? Alternatively, does the media ignore their voices? Therefore, this study verifies which or what type of citizen/people was being constructed in the 2013 media coverage on the issue of comfort women, which was triggered by Mayor Toru Hashimoto's remarks.

### Context of the Case: Background of Toru Hashimoto's Remarks on Comfort Women

The term comfort woman refers to a woman who performed sexual "labor" for the Japanese army during the Second World War. In Japan, problems associated with comfort women attracted substantial attention in 1991, when an appeal was raised to the Tokyo District Court by former comfort women and two Korean war-survivors of the Second World War; further, media coverage on the issue increased in January 1992, immediately before Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's visit to South Korea. Since the early 1990s, there have been active discussions on issues pertaining to comfort women. Further, there was a controversy regarding the recruitment of comfort women and operating a comfort station. Public opinion on the definition of comfort women is a polarizing issue in Japanese society.<sup>2</sup>

Although opinions on how comfort women were recruited and comfort stations were managed remain divided, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yohei Kono stated the following in 1993: "Comfort stations were operated in response to the request of the military authorities of the day. The then Japanese military was, directly or indirectly, involved in the establishment and management of the comfort stations and the transfer of comfort women. The recruitment of comfort women was conducted mainly by private recruiters who acted in response to the request of the military. The Government study has revealed that in many cases they were recruited against their own will [...] and that, at times, administrative/military personnel directly took part in the recruitments" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, August 4, 1993).

Mayor of Osaka Toru Hashimoto, who established the regional party *Osaka Ishin-no Kai* (Osaka Restoration Association, or ORA) in 2010 and the national party *Nihon Ishin-no Kai* (Japan Restoration Party, or JRP) in 2012, made controversial remarks regarding comfort women in May 2013. In April 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who had argued that the Japanese military did not directly recruit comfort women and had been critical of the Kono Statement, commented that the Murayama Statement, which apologizes for Japanese colonial rule, was not inherited "as it is." Since Prime Minister Abe is very famous as a conservative politician who justifies the history of Japan, the Japanese society started paying

attention to politician's history recognition of the Second World War. In December 2012, the JRP became the third ruling party in the House of Representatives. Mayor Hashimoto supported Prime Minister Abe's amendment of the Japanese Constitution, which was also considered a conservative policy in Japanese society. Due to this connection with the Abe administration, the conservative aspect of the JRP started attracting attention.

It was under the aforementioned circumstances that Mayor Hashimoto remarked on comfort women. On May 13, 2013, Mayor Hashimoto told reporters in Osaka's City Hall that "For soldiers who risked their lives in circumstances where bullets are flying around like rain and wind, if you want them to get some rest, a comfort women system was necessary. That is clear to anyone" (Asahi Shimbun, May 13, 2013). In response to this remark, a small press conference was held later that evening, in which Hashimoto told reporters that on his visit to the Futenma Air Station in Okinawa for an inspection, he had recommended to the commander that US soldiers should utilize legal sexual services. These remarks highlighted both the issues of comfort women and problems associated with the Okinawa US military base, which are both controversial issues triggering extensive debate in Japanese society.

Hashimoto's remarks were extensively noticed in Japan, and a majority of the media outlets discussed them critically. The media pointed out that Mayor Hashimoto had disregarded women's human rights and hurt their dignity. In response to media critics, Mayor Hashimoto thoroughly accused the media of reporting his remarks incorrectly.<sup>3</sup> In an interview on May 17, 2013, he declared to the reporters that he would not answer any questions from the media, and he shared the following statuses on Twitter:

"A journalist [...] from the *Asahi* must be a 'smart' person. Otherwise he cannot say to me that I should have accurately spoken a word for word on television. I don't think I can do it, so I will quit a press conference. This is the end." (@hashimoto\_lo, May 17)

"Well, it was too much. This is, I guess, the limitations of the political coverage of Japan." (@hashimoto\_lo, May 18)

"They (TV performer) do not understand the essence behind my explanation. They do not even try to do. And without any effort, they have criticized me due to my words which were edited by the media out of context." (@hashimoto\_lo, May 19, words in brackets are added by author)

"Media professionals, commentators, experts who criticize me [...]. But even worse than them, Japanese Congress members show how low level they are at this time." (@hashimoto\_lo, May 19)

As clearly demonstrated in these tweets, Hashimoto argued that the media had

“distorted” his remarks and that such “elite” journalists could not understand how difficult it is for “common people like us” to speak accurately in front of the television camera. These Tweets proved that Hashimoto is a populist.

Even after the press conference resumed on May 20, 2013, there were still many critics from foreign countries continued to criticize Mayor Hashimoto. Subsequently, the mayor decided to hold a press conference at the Japan Foreign Correspondents’ Association in Tokyo on May 27, 2013. However, this conference did not change the situation. On June 23, 2013, JRP was defeated in the Tokyo Metropolitan Council Election, and the results were reported as a “crushing defeat.” The female candidate pointed out that she had lost the support of women due to Hashimoto’s remarks on comfort women.

## Method and Measurements

Stories were selected from the *Yomiuri Shimbun* (hereafter, *Yomiuri*) and *Asahi Shimbun* (hereafter, *Asahi*). Both the national newspapers have countrywide readership (more than 5 million subscribers each) and cover national, international, and local news events. Further, half of all the newspaper subscribers in Osaka read the *Yomiuri* or *Asahi*.

This study coded stories from May 13 to June 25, 2013. The analytical period was thus fixed because, first, the Tokyo Metropolitan Council Election was held on June 23, in which Mayor Hashimoto tried to win seats to enter national politics; second, both newspapers mentioned his comfort women remarks in relation to the June election; and, third, people’s reactions to the election results were reported on June 25, 2013.

A total of 582 news stories from the *Yomiuri* and *Asahi* were coded, of which 226 stories were from *Yomiuri* and 356 from *Asahi*. Both newspapers have news archives on the Internet. Stories that include the words “Hashimoto” and “comfort women” were extracted and coded (see Table 1 for details). This analysis used information from this period about the speaker and any statement contents that were displayed in brackets. When the same remark was used in different articles, it was coded as a single case ( $N=246$ ). This information included statements, protest statements, and press releases.

The category *Political elite sources* ( $N=180$ ; 73.2% of the total number of sources) included representatives of government agencies at local, regional, and national levels who belonged to the ruling parties, such as the Liberal Democratic Party and the *Komeito* or opposition parties such as the Democratic Party of Japan, Japan Communist Party, Social Democratic Party, and Your Party. It includes representatives of the *Osaka Ishin-no Kai* and *Nihon Ishin-no Kai*, which were operated at the time by Mayor Hashimoto and the popular conservative politician Shintaro Ishihara. In addition, the representatives and officials of the government in

Table 1. Types and Brief Descriptions of Sources (N=246)

Source types/roles	Summary of source description(N; % of the total number of sources)
Political elite sources (N=180; 73.2%)	
Politicians of ruling parties	Representatives of government agencies at local, regional, and national levels who belong to the ruling parties (the Liberal Democratic Party and <i>Komeito</i> ) (N=28)
Politicians of Hashimoto's parties	Representatives of government agencies at local, regional, and national levels who belong to <i>Nihon Ishin-no Kai</i> or <i>Osaka Ishin-no Kai</i> (N=108)
Politicians of opposition parties	Representatives and politicians of opposition parties (the Japan Communist Party, Democratic Party of Japan, Social Democratic Party, and Your Party). It also includes the bipartisan groups and politicians who do not belong to any party (N=26)
Foreign countries	Government representatives or officials of foreign countries and the United Nations (N=18)
Institutional/organizational sources (N=61; 24.8%)	
Social movement organizations	Sources from non-government-owned organizations (N=23)
Experts	Sources from academicians or intellectuals who remain outside the government (N=23)
Media/journalists	Explicit reference to information obtained from media or journalists who were not involved in the construction of the news story (N=15)
Sources of citizens or the people (N=5; 2%)	
Citizens	Citizens or groups of citizens who participated in gatherings of social movement/pressure groups without being full-time members of such organizations (N=3)
Citizens	Citizens or groups of citizens who participated in gatherings of social movement/pressure groups without being full-time members of such organizations (N=3)
Ordinary people	Citizens who are not committed to or do not participate in any activities; also known as the "man-in-the-street" or vox pop (N=2)

foreign countries were included in this category.

Further, the category *Institutional/organizational sources* (N=61; 24.8% of the total number of sources) included sources from non-government-owned social movement organizations, experts such as academicians or intellectuals, and media/journalists referred to in the news stories.

The category *Sources of citizens or the people* (N=5; 2% of the total number of sources) included sources from citizens who had participated in gatherings of social movement groups without being full members of such organizations or groups. It also included sources from the ordinary people who had not committed themselves to any activities.

### Result: Elite-Centered Media Coverage on Hashimoto’s Remarks

As shown in Table 1, the category Sources of citizens or the people have the least numbers among sources. To understand how the sources were expressed in the news, Figure 1 depicts the trend of presence of sources in the news per day. As clarified by the figure, on three days, one source category exceeded 10. First, on May 14, 2013 the politicians of ruling parties, who had commented on Hashimoto’s May-13 remarks, were the most quoted source. Second, on May 17, Mayor Hashimoto declared that he would not accept any interview nor hold any conference for the media afterward, which was quoted in the news. Third, on May 27, Mayor Hashimoto held a press conference for foreign journalists in Tokyo. Hence, on that day, media/journalists sources were quoted the most. It is clear that the selection of sources depends on the news that journalists intend to cover.

Figure 1: Presence of Sources in the News: The Numbers of Sources Per Day.

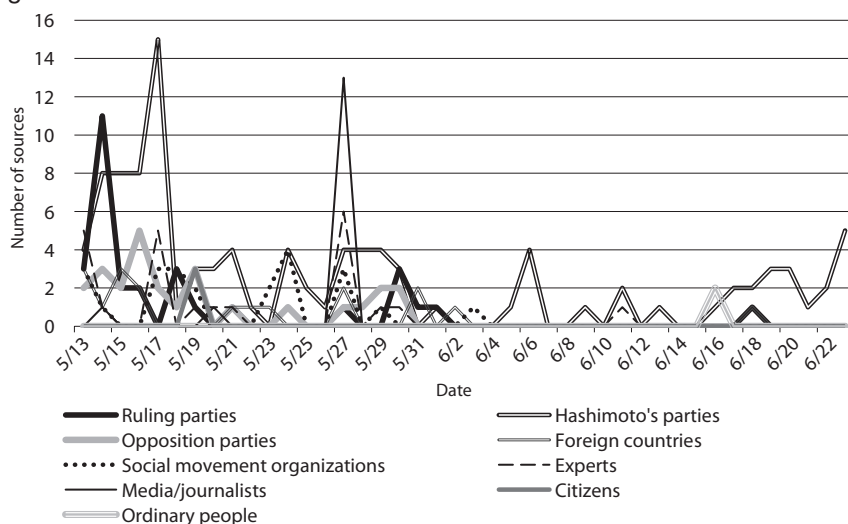


Figure 2: Trend of Number of Sources in Each Category Per Day.

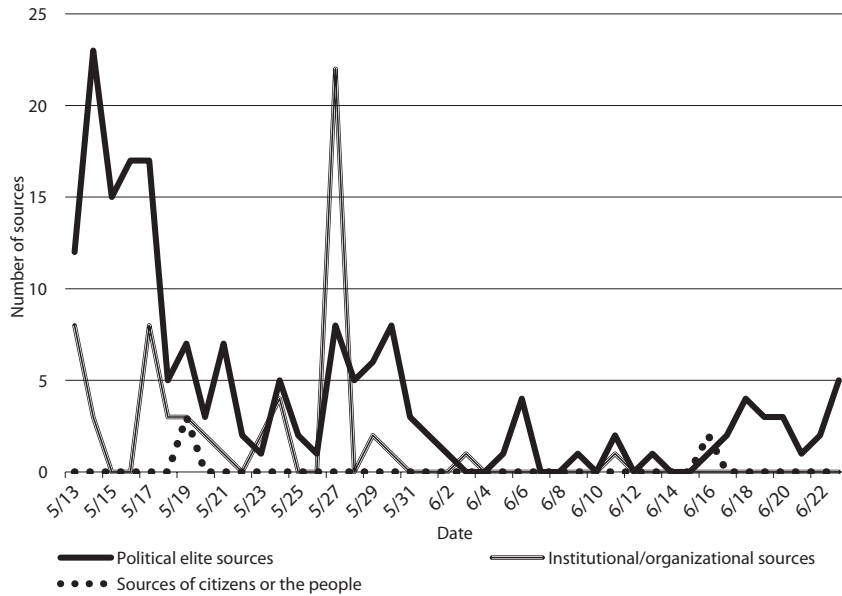


Figure 3: Trend of Number of Sources in Each Category Per Day (Excluding Comments by Mayor Hashimoto).

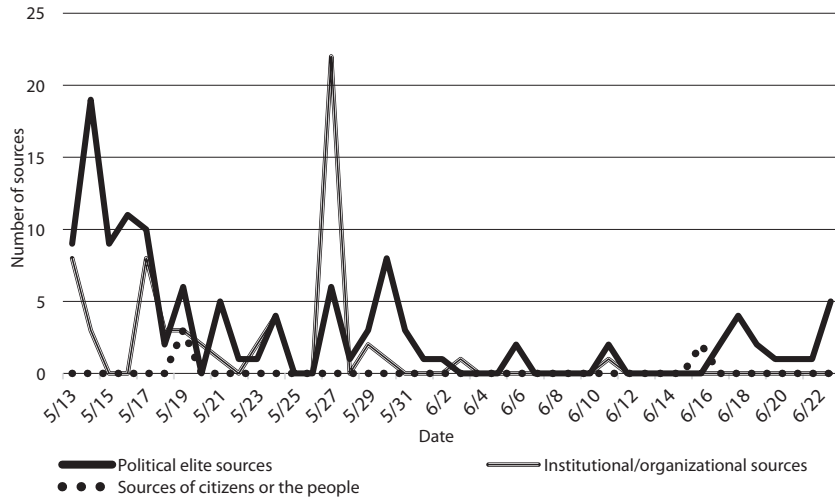


Figure 2 depicts the trend of the numbers of sources in each of the following categories: Political elite sources, Institutional/organizational sources, and Sources of citizens or the people. It is clear that Political elite sources is the most quoted category in the news, except for May 27 and June 16. The media reported ordinary people's reactions to the JRP's election campaign on June 16. However, there were only two sources of ordinary people during the analytical period. There were also three of the category Sources of citizens or the people quoted in the news on May 19, although these three sources comprised all the citizens who had participated in the gathering of the social movement organization for comfort women. Figures 1 & 2 reveal how less frequently the Japanese media quotes Sources of citizen or the people in the news. In addition, it clarifies how much the Japanese media depends on Political elite sources.

Therefore, based on this discussion, who was the most quoted source? Certainly, it was Mayor Hashimoto ( $N=63$ ; 25.6% of the total number of sources). Figure 3 ruled out the number of sources of Mayor Hashimoto from Figure 2. Figure 3 reveals the extent to which the Japanese media depends on Political elite sources, although Institutional/organizational sources exceeded the number of Political elite sources in three days.

## Discussion and Conclusion

From the distribution of source types discussed in the previous Section, we can obtain some important findings. First, in the reporting of Hashimoto's remarks on the issue of comfort women, ordinary people were quoted only rarely. Second, the majority of the reporting on this incident used responses from political elites. This suggests that the comments made by Mayor Hashimoto on the issue of comfort women were discussed by the political elite.

The following three points can provide the background for such elite-centered reporting: First, the issue pertains to comfort women. As mentioned earlier, comfort women form a complex issue on which diverse views are expressed in Japanese society, and ordinary people rarely have concrete opinions. Therefore, political elites, who can accurately express the problems of Hashimoto's remarks, became the main sources in this issue. In addition, this problem is perceived as a political issue, rather than a gender-specific or a human rights-based issue. This is because Hashimoto's remarks included the Okinawa Futenma US base problem, as well, and they were considered to influence the election results.

Second, the media considers political elites to have a high news value, in general. The news media attempted to explain why the mayor's remarks needed to be covered. For this purpose, it is convincing to include a comment from an authority figure in a responsible position with a high profile. This is proved by the aforementioned survey, as well, which suggested that the news media tends to focus

on mainly male elites (Curran et al., 2017: 824).

Third, the routine practices of news gathering are important, as well. Both *Yomiuri* and *Asahi* often selected members of the JRP as sources. Further, both have frequently interviewed many members of the ruling and opposition parties. Journalists find it easier to interview political elites than establishing new reliable sources among ordinary people. However, unlike previous studies that illustrate how Japanese television news programs mainly focused on bureaucrats or Congressional discussions, this study found that different voices not belonging to political elites were also included in news reports. The percentage of Political elite sources, except for Mayor Hashimoto, was 63.9% of the total comments. The numbers of sources from social movements ( $N=23$ ) and experts ( $N=23$ ) are similar to those of the sources of ruling party ( $N=28$ ) and opposition party ( $N=26$ ) politicians. Since a popular populist politician triggered this controversy, members from other associations were probably good sources. However, even then, the number of Sources of citizens or the people is low. Since people involved in the populist discourse do not include social movements, experts or the media, these results suggest that ordinary people represent only a small number of newspaper quotations. This suggests that newspapers focus more on the elites in society than on ordinary people.

Mayor Hashimoto actively attacked the media and repeatedly criticized it that the media could not understand the opinions and feelings of “us” or “ordinary people,” since the media positioned itself with the elites, or “them.” Hashimoto applied such populism strategies to counteract criticism regarding his remarks on comfort women. Hashimoto’s discourse suggested that the elites were self-righteous in their criticisms of ordinary people/us.

On the other hand, this analysis revealed that the media has not been able to construct “people” that can resist the populist’s binary confrontation schemes, such as elite versus ordinary people. Indeed, compared to the findings of earlier research, the proportion of bureaucrats and politicians quoted in this study was smaller, and there were numerous quotations from social movement organizations, experts and the media. However, it clarified that the majority of newspaper sources belonged to members of the ruling and opposition parties, as well as foreign countries.

There has been a criticism of the binary conflict schema in the populist communication strategy and the media has been criticized as being “elitist” and not representative of ordinary people. However, with respect to the comfort women issue, in response to the populist criticism on the media focusing on elites, there was no discourse by the mass media that effectively challenged the populist strategy.

## NOTES

- 1 The Kisha club provides exclusive access to information by central or local

governments and business associates with its membership organizations.

- 2 Views remain divided regarding whether they should be termed “military comfort women” or comfort women. Moreover, although there are opinions that comfort women were “sex slaves” since they were not free to move, many have opined that these women were prostituted (Morris-Suzuki, 2015: 7-8). Due to the occurrence of diverse forms of sexual violence in the battlefield, there is criticism that this definition of a sex slave is limited and does not capture the structural problem of sexual violence in the battlefield (Kumagai, 2014: 32-33). In this manner, Japanese society is not in agreement about the meaning of a sex slave.
- 3 Mayor Hashimoto appeared on the television program and admitted that he did not choose the right words (May 16, 2013). However, criticisms against him continued after this explanation. As a result, Mayor Hashimoto began criticizing the media. Although he had commented earlier that the media reported his remarks correctly, he later criticized the media and argued that his remarks were reported incorrectly and that the media was responsible for the manner in which his remarks had evolved into a controversy.

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