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*Symposium Record*

## Journalism Education in the Age of Social Media

TSUDA Shotaro\*

### Introduction

This is a record of a symposium held to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Institute for Journalism, Media and Communication Studies (MEDIACOM) at Keio University. It was held on 24 September 2022 at the Mita Campus of Keio University.

MEDIACOM was founded in 1946 as the Institute for Newspaper Studies and has sent many of its graduates to work for newspapers and broadcasters. However, the drastic changes in the media environment in recent years have necessitated a rethink of the nature of journalism itself, not to mention journalism education. To discuss this issue, the symposium invited two newspaper journalists, one online media journalist, one NGO representative and one media researcher as panellists. I acted as a moderator.

At the beginning of the symposium, I explained its background. For years I have been in contact with many students who want to work in the mass media, but in recent years I have often heard them express concern about the future of the mass media. Recent research supports the validity of their concerns. According to a national survey conducted by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, on average only half of the teenagers and twenties watched television in real time every day in 2021, compared to over 90 per cent of the same age group in the 1990s (Hirata et al. 2010: 5; Uchibori and Watanabe 2022: 6). Besides, it is also well known that young people rarely read newspapers, although they sometimes access news articles written by newspaper journalists on the internet. On the other hand, the above survey showed that 65% of the same age group watched YouTube every day.

In such a media environment, the question of how to make the media business sustainable is a very important one. At the same time, it forces every journalist to think about how to deal with the new pressures they face in their daily work. I hoped that this symposium would be an opportunity to examine such issues facing

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journalists from different angles.

## Profile of the Panellists

After my introduction each of the panellists gave a short speech. NAKAJIMA Miyuki, who works for the national newspaper Mainichi Shimbun, is involved in building a digital archive for the paper, while also conducting research on human relationships mediated by information technology as part of a doctoral programme at the University of Tokyo. Her work combines World War II newspaper photographs with the latest geographic information systems to open up new possibilities for journalism. As a journalist, while reporting on the areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake, she felt the need to pick up the small voices within them. By working with the victims of the earthquake on activities such as the campaign to raise the height of the seawalls and the creation of community cafes, she sought to document the problems they faced during the activities.

The next panellist was MIURA Hideyuki, a reporter for the national newspaper Asahi Shimbun. He is a well-known, award-winning reporter who has published many works. On 11 March 2011, he happened to be on the Hiyoshi Campus of Keio University, reporting on air raid shelters during the Second World War. The earthquake struck shortly after he finished this coverage, and he immediately began preparing to travel to the affected areas to cover the disaster. He ended up living for a year in Minami Sanriku, Miyagi Prefecture, which was badly damaged by the earthquake and tsunami, and continued his reporting. After Minami Sanriku, MIURA was sent to New York, conflict zones in Africa and Fukushima. While reporting in these areas, he said, he continued to question what journalism could do in the face of the vulnerability of human life.

After MIURA, NOJO Momoko, a representative of NO YOUTH NO JAPAN, an NPO that promotes the political participation of young people, introduced herself. When she was an undergraduate student at Keio University, she studied in Denmark for a year and was impressed by the high level of political participation among young people. According to her, there was a sense among young people that they could influence politics, and the issues they raised were actually on the political agenda. After returning to Japan, she founded NO YOUTH NO JAPAN and has been active in promoting youth political participation and addressing inequalities for women through Instagram and other online media. She is also an external editor for the online media company HuffPost and is a frequent guest on radio and television to discuss current affairs.

The next panellist HATACHI Kota is a journalist at the online media company BuzzFeed Japan. He was originally a reporter for the Asahi Shimbun before joining BuzzFeed in 2016. His reasons for moving were that he felt the working style of newspaper journalists was too demanding, and he didn't feel that his articles were

reaching readers. Another reason was that he wanted to write articles in volumes beyond the limits of a newspaper. At BuzzFeed, he has been thinking about what online journalism can do when mass media is often criticised on social media. With this in mind, he has been trying to get information out on Twitter as an individual and respond directly to questions raised online. Among other things, he has continued to fact-check information circulating online. He has also reported on online hate speech and hate crimes against minorities.

OISHI Yutaka was the last panellist to speak. He is professor emeritus of mass communication studies at Keio University and was director of MEDIACOM from 2007 to 2011 and president of the Japan Society for Journalism and Mass Communication, renamed the Japan Association for Media, Journalism and Communication Studies, from 2015 to 2017. He now teaches at Jumonji University and Tokai University and is a member of the Broadcasting Ethics and Program Improvement Organization (BPO).

OISHI raised fundamental questions about the nature of journalism. The first is whether journalism should abandon the values of objectivity and neutrality. On the one hand, the concept of civic journalism allows journalists to lead society in a better direction by committing themselves to certain values. This is exactly the kind of journalism that NAKAJIMA tried to do when she became involved in the victims' movement mentioned above. However, it also means that journalism affirms and participates in a particular movement. Given the distorted reporting during the Asia-Pacific war and the problems of fake news in recent years, the dangers of journalism's commitment to certain values need to be recognised. The second issue raised by OISHI was the relationship between journalism and social integration. Mass media have contributed to social integration, for better or worse, by providing shared information. Whether online journalism can play this role is a very important question.

## Issues for Discussion

After the short speech, the panellists discussed some issues related to contemporary journalism. I briefly summarise the discussion below.

The first issue is about the objectivity and neutrality in journalism. As NAKAJIMA says, there is always subjectivity involved in deciding what to report and what angle to take. This is particularly true in such situations where journalists themselves are involved in projects to revitalise local communities. There is also an approach of the so-called "new journalism", in which journalists emphasise their subjectivity and write articles using the subject "I". MIURA argued that the way articles are written should be different depending on the medium. In the case of public broadcasters and newspapers, they should aim to be as objective as possible, while in the case of books they can use new journalistic methods. In addition,

HATACHI says that when fact-checking online information, he tries to avoid introducing subjectivity into the content of the article. While what information is fact-checked depends on his subjectivity, he tries to correct misinformation regardless of its political partisanship. HATACHI also argues that in articles where the subject is “I”, it is important to make sure that the reader knows that subjectivity is being introduced.

What is also important in terms of neutrality is that if journalism abandons it, the division of society may become more serious. OISHI argues that if the media become highly partisan, as in the US, there will no longer be a common understanding of what is real, and even the maintenance of society may become difficult. Of course, the diversity of values is important. When values become too relative, however, democracy can become unsustainable. In a highly divided political climate, it is easy for people to denounce news reports that contradict their views as ‘biased’, while trying to defend news reports that agree with them on the principle of ‘freedom of expression’.

As political polarisation increases, therefore, so does criticism of the media. It is well known that the former President Trump has attacked media outlets that are critical of him, calling them ‘fake news’. Although political polarisation has not reached this level in Japan, criticism of the mass media is widespread on social media. However, NOJO argues that we should not overestimate such criticism. Although such criticism is made by a small number of users, when it is picked up by the mass media, it gives the impression that many people support the criticism. Of course some journalists deserve to be criticised, but many do their job properly, says NOJO, and much of the criticism is ideological and it is impossible to convince everyone. NAKAJIMA also points out the difficulty of convincing critics in a situation where criticism is overheated: No matter what you say, they will pounce on your words. Nevertheless, NAKAJIMA argues that in everyday situations it is important to have a regular dialogue with ordinary readers and to share each other’s backgrounds. HATACHI also insists that such media criticism should be judged on a case-by-case basis. Some of the current media criticism deals with issues that are considered problematic even within the media. By improving these shortcomings, media criticism could be curbed.

Criticism of the mass media on social media is often based on a simple black and white composition. For example, journalists are often criticised on social media for not paying their interviewees, and this practice is seen as journalistic arrogance. In reality, this is judged on a case-by-case basis and sometimes experts are paid for their comments. However, such minor differences in circumstances are not taken into account in social media criticism. OISHI points out that journalistic activities are essentially a grey area that cannot be clearly defined. In the past, journalists learned about such ambiguous activities through on-the-job training. However, as media’s business conditions deteriorate, on-the-job training for journalists is also

becoming more difficult. Whether journalism education at universities can provide an alternative to such on-the-job training will be an important question, OISHI suggests.

One of the reasons for the increasing polarisation of the internet and the spread of fake news is the importance of pageviews in the distribution of information on the web. Achieving large numbers of pageviews is directly linked to commercial interests, and this has led to the incitement of hatred and the spread of provocative fake news. It has also been suggested that there is a tendency to disseminate entertainment-oriented information rather than serious news. However, MIURA argues that readers should not be underestimated. It is true that political news is shared less than cat videos on social media, but important information still spreads on its own. It is hubris for journalists to think that they have to spread important information on behalf of readers. MIURA says that instead of trying to get pageviews, journalists should think that the necessary information will eventually prevail and concentrate on their journalistic work.

On the other hand, according to HATACHI, it is not easy to get pageviews even for entertainment-oriented information, and a close analysis of pageviews shows that even hard news is actually read by many users. The concept of pageviews itself is not that bad. What is important is to ensure that the valuable articles are read by a large number of people. If you want your articles to be read by many people, there are many things to consider, such as headlines, sub-headlines, thumbnails, when to publish the article and how to promote it on social media. For example, if you publish a hard news story on a Friday night, it will not be read very often, but surprisingly it will be read on Sunday. There are bad ways to get pageviews, such as looking for scandals, distributing inflammatory articles and cherry-picking online comments from celebrities, which are not sustainable. There are good ways to get pageviews, says HATACHI.

NOJO also notes that newspaper articles are difficult to read, especially for younger people. It is often necessary to have prior knowledge in order to understand newspaper articles. Information available on the internet often provides a 'background' introduction. Young people who are used to such an information environment have a high barrier to newspaper articles. Therefore, NOJO states that the existing media do not make good use of their own excellent information resources.

## Concluding Remarks

At the end of the symposium, I asked each panellist for a message to students aspiring to become journalists. NAKAJIMA said she wanted them to grow in their ability to be responsible transmitters of information. She said that because we live in an age where anyone can transmit information, the ability to judge and write is

needed more than ever, and she hopes that students will develop these skills through discussions with their peers.

MIURA said that when he talked to students and young people, he regretted the lack of books they read. Even some newspaper journalists hardly read books. University teachers should keep telling students to read books. Social media is just a puddle, but books are an ocean. MIURA said that just as the human body is created by what it eats, the human mind is created by what it reads, and the depth of our lives depends on how many books we read.

NOJO spoke of the peer pressure she felt when speaking to her generation. To resist this pressure, she said, it was important to have confidence in oneself and to create a mind that would not be swept away. According to her, if such an attitude is not developed before starting to work in the mass media, they will succumb to the pressure created by the internal atmosphere and social mood.

HATACHI stressed the importance of the basics for journalists. He said that journalists often get lost in their work and that basic knowledge is necessary to put that hesitation into words. It is important for every reporter to learn the basics in order to respond to the rampant criticism on the web. HATACHI also hoped that the student would visit different places during the long holidays. There are many things that can only be understood by actually going there, he said.

OISHI also urged the students to increase their exposure to books and films, and to travel. He further stressed the importance of keeping records: it is useful to write down what you think when you read, see or visit. He also said that when looking at events, it was important to keep questioning the validity of one's own point of view and to prepare oneself to create such viewpoints through reading, watching and travelling.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the problems facing journalism today are so serious that it is impossible to discuss them all in a symposium of a few hours. In addition, the media environment is so volatile that it is extremely difficult to look into the future and predict what kind of journalism will be successful. However, given the current situation, it will probably be difficult to maintain large-scale organised journalism as it is today, with the probable exception of NHK. In this case, the skills of individual journalists will be more important for survival. Moreover, journalists will be required to have a wider range of skills than ever before, including, as HATACHI argues, the ingenuity to ensure that their stories are read by a wider audience. It is important to note here, however, that there are concerns that the demand for such a large number of skills will diminish the fundamental skills of journalists (Kammer 2013: 54). One such skill is listening to others, a method that cannot be replaced by gathering information online. And getting a good story out of others requires a lot of knowledge on the part of journalists. That means a lot of reading to ask good questions. Without interviews and reading books, piecing together information from the internet to form a complete picture can easily lead to

conspiracy theories.

However, there are many different types of journalism and there is probably no one right way to be a good journalist. As the organiser, I would be very delighted if the students and others who attended the symposium took away some ideas for their own journalism and training.

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