

Funding Public Interest Journalism in Japan: An Overview

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Abstract

Public-interest journalism in Japan has been mainly maintained by newspapers, which enjoyed a high household subscription rate based on a home delivery system. However, as in other countries, the spread of the Internet determined people in Japan to habitually read news on free platforms. Consequently, newspaper companies are struggling to survive with declining advertising and fewer readers worldwide, determining several debates on sustainable models of journalism and funding opportunities.

In this context, however, Japanese newspapers have avoided major changes, focusing on employment in home delivery system services and newsrooms, thus managing to avoid substantial journalist cutbacks. Newspaper companies still rely heavily on subscriptions and advertising fees as their main source of income. Newspaper publishers and broadcasters have long been accustomed to the two-sided revenue model, a business that sells content to audiences while directing their attention to sponsors. However, the journalism and business of traditional media are under threat because they no longer have a monopoly on the interests of their audiences with the spread of the Internet.

This study examines the ecosystem of public-interest journalism in Japan, particularly focusing on the funding of city-level community journalism, which has been scantily explored and discussed so far, and investigates funding attempts and their extent in the digital age. First, the current financial situation of mass, alternative, and various community media is examined through previous studies and published data to illustrate the ecosystem of the journalism industry in Japan. The managerial status of small journalism is then clarified through a content analysis of six community papers published in a certain prefecture, interviews with community press journalists, and independent local volunteer journalists. Finally, the discussion considers how to establish community journalism in Japan in terms of funding.

This research revealed that (1) Japanese national newspapers are struggling to monetise not only paper-based but also online journalism; 2) Japanese alternative journalism, albeit only slightly, is built on a donation model; 3) investigative journalism activities are rarely practised in Japanese community media; and 4) systems and networks to support small-scale journalism are lacking in Japan. This study highlights the issues of the Japanese media that need to be addressed to build sustainable journalism models and increase people's interest towards public-interest news.

Keywords: public interest journalism, funding, news desert, community journalism, volunteer journalism

1. Introduction

Contemporary society faces crises such as climate change, poverty, inequality, the crumbling of democracy, and its sustainability is being questioned. Constructing a sustainable society – environmentally, socially and economically – demands journalism that explicitly addresses the challenges faced by society (Fojo Media Institute, 2022), through verified information and fair debates. However, advertising and subscription business models that support traditional media companies cannot do so in the digital age (Kaye & Quinn, 2010). In fact, Abernathy (2018) reported on the expanding ‘News Deserts’ – regions where local newspapers have closed down and with no media outlet for local news – owing to various issues identified through a diverse range of research-based findings. The loss of access to information on local history and daily life prevents the development of a sense of community identity (Mathews, 2020) and deprives residents of the opportunity to accurately understand the local current situation and discuss the future, making it difficult to approach the government with issues and solutions (Magasic & Hess, 2021). Furthermore, it determines an absence of localised, issue-oriented coverage of elections, which cannot be provided by regional newspapers (Shaker, 2011), and a decline in participation in civic activities (Shaker, 2014).

During the ten years of governance of the suppressive Abe administration, Japan’s mass media coverage became considerably more self-regulating, its rank dropping to 71 in 2022 in terms of press freedom, as reported by Reporters Without Borders. However, public trust in the press remained relatively high; according to the Reuters Digital News Report 2022, 44% of the participants answered that they trusted most news most of the time (Newman, 2022). News consumption is characterised by a high household subscription rate to national and local newspapers (Hayashi, 2017) and six major nationwide TV networks, including NHK, the public broadcaster. Public-interest journalism in Japan is maintained mainly by these traditional media organisations.

In the last two decades, public media consumption has changed due to the spread of the Internet, with Japanese people now habitually reading news on free platforms, whereas only 10% pay for online news (Newman, 2022:19). A survey revealed that 42% of the respondents did not check the source of the news (Hotaka, 2018). Newspaper publishers and broadcasters have become accustomed to a two-sided revenue model (Anderson & Gabszewicz, 2006) targeting the reader/audience as sponsors. Those reading news for free on the Internet do not perceive this situation as a serious problem; however, newspaper companies are struggling to survive with declining advertising and fewer readers. Furthermore, recently, the number of newspaper subscriptions have been falling, with twice-daily deliveries being reduced to once daily.

This study focuses on the funding of Japanese community journalism, which has not been discussed much thus far, and investigates funding attempts and their extent. Little research has been conducted on how journalism in Japan is structured and funded (Ide, 2016). Many small-scale media outlets exist at the city level; however, similar to journalism studies in other countries (Kaye & Quinn, 2010; Deuze & Witschege, 2018), most researchers have been interested in their content and paid little attention to the systems supporting their activities. Very few studies have been conducted on the political economy (Mizukoshi, 2003) of the Japanese mass media, partly because of the lack of media disclosure.

2. Mass media in Japan

To examine the state of local public-interest journalism, first, an overview of the current financial state of mass media and alternative media is provided, thus illustrating the ecosystem of the journalism industry in Japan based mainly on previous research.

2.1 Newspapers

Newspapers are the main providers of public-interest journalism in Japan and are symbolised by their monthly subscription service and high home delivery rate, which stands at 95.01% (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2019). The circulation of Japanese newspapers has been overwhelmingly high compared to other countries (Statista, 2023). The relatively strong management of Japanese newspapers is considered to have been supported mainly by two systems: ‘the one-prefecture, one-paper’ system and the ‘exceptionally permitted price maintenance’ system (Sakata, 2000). During the Sino-Japanese War, about 1200 newspapers existed in Japan; under the subsequent national control, the ‘one-prefecture, one-paper’ system reduced their number to 57 (Sakai, 2019). Thus, even after the war, local newspapers in each prefecture had a strong readership in their districts. Historically, almost half of the circulation of Japanese news came from prefectural newspapers and half from national newspapers (Satsuka, 2000).

Regarding their management, characteristically, Japanese newspaper companies spend considerable amounts of money on sales promotion, with a 40%–50% sale expense ratio (Kawauchi, 2007). Watanabe (2020) asserted that the circulation numbers of Japan’s national dailies have not been earned through journalistic achievements; instead, the figures are a result of extensive and effective sales activities. Conversely, the ‘exceptionally permitted price maintenance’ system for four products, including newspapers and magazines, has been regarded as a practical state support for maintaining public-interest journalism in Japan, as it is considered outside the Anti-Monopoly Law (Sakata, 2000).

2.2 TV Broadcasting

2.2.1 NHK

Along with newspapers, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) has been regarded as a major media outlet for public-interest journalism. Launched in 1925, the NHK is now a public broadcaster with two TV channels, two radio channels, two satellite channels, as well as a global TV and radio channel. Under the United States' (U.S.) occupation, the NHK was placed under the control of the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers and became a special corporation based on the Broadcasting Act of 1950 (Sakai, 2019). NHK's business revenue has gradually increased, becoming the largest media complex in Japan, with 47% of the population watching NHK news weekly (Newman, 2022).

The NHK constitutes the Management Committee as a council that decides on the annual budget, business plan, and basic programme editing, while supervising directors in the execution of their duties. The Management Board consists of 12 members with broad experience and knowledge, capable of fair decision-making regarding public welfare. They are appointed by the Prime Minister with the consent of the House of Representatives and House of Councillors (Suzuki, 2017), and the Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications yearly submits the corporation's income and expenditure budget as well as its business plans to the Diet for approval. Thus, it is difficult to criticise NHK's administration; commissioners' appointment and NHK's budgetary authority are in political hands, often raising questions about the organisation's independence as a public broadcaster.

2.2.2 Commercial TV stations

Terrestrial commercial TV stations play a significant role in public-interest journalism in Japan. Their establishment was permitted through the broadcasting system reforms of 1950. Three characteristics of Japanese commercial broadcasting were identified. First, the five national networks are established under the strong influence of national newspaper companies (including local newspaper companies) or stations located in Tokyo; second, there are between two and five local terrestrial broadcasters in any given prefecture; and third, commercial broadcasters are under the direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, which makes it difficult for them to be truly independent (Sasada, 2009). Indeed, in the last few years, political controversy has arisen over broadcasting neutrality.

Currently, Japan has 194 broadcasting stations, ranging from five major TV stations in Tokyo to radio stations in the prefectural regions. Among them, 121 local TV stations mainly transmit programmes produced by stations in Tokyo as well as some regional programmes. Tokyo TV stations supply local stations with nationwide programmes – accompanied by a large number of advertisements – at an unbeatable price, which is more efficient for local stations than producing programmes on their own. However, because this allocation is confidentially

negotiated with each local station, it is alleged that Tokyo stations have increased their own profits without increasing their allocation to local stations (Nomura, 1990). However, the commercial profits from the programs in Tokyo allowed the latter to provide local public-interest news in each region for a few hours (Sakai, 2019).

2.3 Alternative media in the 2000s

In the early 2000s, when the Internet was generally gaining popularity in Japan, an alternative initiative emerged, which was a departure from the journalism that had existed thus far. The keywords were ‘citizen-oriented’ (Oh, 2005). Several Internet newspapers were published, including *Nikkan Berita*, *JanJan*, *PJ News*, and *Oh My News Japan*, led by journalists with new aspirations after leaving Japanese newspapers. One feature of these newspapers was that they recruited ‘citizen journalists’, who were not professional journalists, and attempted to create novel news articles through publicly solicited reports. In this sense, alternative media differs from traditional community media.

JanJan was officially launched in March 2003 and ceased publication at the end of March 2010, morphing into a blog and ending its activities altogether a few years later. *JanJan*, which stood for ‘Japan Alternative News for Justice and New Cultures’, was based on the concept of ‘media by citizens for citizens’ while simultaneously representing the sound of alarm bells for society. The operating organisation, Japan Internet Newspaper Co., Ltd., was established by Ken Takeuchi, a representative director and former editorial board member of the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper and mayor of Kamakura City (Tsuchiya, 2007).

JanJan’s revenue was 100% from advertising and the main investor was an affiliate software company, Fujisoft ABC Ltd. At the time of its suspension, approximately 8000 citizen journalists were registered. Citizen submissions were checked and revised by the editorial department before publication, and the number of submissions published per day was no more than 10 in 2003–2004. As of July 2007, this number was estimated to be between 20 and 25. Based on its abundant financial resources and contributions from citizen journalists, the newspaper published planned content through paid articles. In addition, a fully fledged election-related database of politicians and political funding has been established (Tsuchiya, 2007).

Unfortunately, because of management problems, *JanJan*, similar to several other online journalism sites, ceased operations in 2014. Oda (2022), who served as the editor-in-chief of *PJ News*, reflected on the difficulties of making citizen journalism profitable in a business sense, stating that the supply of news coverage has outstripped demand, probably due to external factors rather than the other way around. Attempts to turn citizens into reporters have not succeeded operationally, and the alternative media remaining in Japan today is essentially professional-centred journalism such as Ourplanet TV.

2.4 Community media

2.4.1 Community papers

The history of community papers in Japan dates back to around 1880, when local assemblies were established throughout the country (Tamura, 1983). The community press at that time was mostly set up from a local political perspective; however, soon after, it was forced to merge under the ‘one-prefecture, one-paper’ policy during World War II. After the war, local newspapers at the prefectural level continued to gain readers; thus, the community press had to continue seeking readers in disadvantageous conditions. According to Tamura, two community press groups were established: those founded before the war and re-established immediately after, and those founded in the post-war period of rapid economic growth from the 1960s onwards. While initially, most were weekly or quarterly, daily publications gradually increased; an estimated 300 dailies were distributed nationwide as of 1983, and nearly 2000 dailies were being mailed (Tamura, 1983:26).

Through interviews with leading community newspapers across the nation, Yamada (1988) found that Japanese areas that can maintain a stable degree of community press coverage are those with a population of 50,000 or more, located at least 30 km from the prefectural capital. Community newspapers provided a certain amount of administrative information and community news, including information on births and condolences. In the Tohoku Region in the 1980s, more than half of the regional newspapers were additionally engaged in printing and publishing businesses, including PR papers as a sideline business, while some companies had simultaneous businesses with property rentals, shops, and tourism, for example (Yamada, 1985). In addition, business owners often ventured into unprofitable businesses based on a sense of societal mission and gained social prestige for their corporate group by investing profits into the unprofitable sector of a newspaper company (Yamada, 1998).

Other researchers have further identified reasons for stable management, such as the unique cultural sphere and information demands of local industries (Ushiyama, 2014), the effect of the historical Civil Rights Movement, a preference for political opinion (Iwasa, 2022), and the emergence and spread of influential business models (Iwasa, 2022; Yamada, 1988). Moreover, Yamada (2018) observed that, to some extent, community newspapers are traditionally family run which may be desirable in terms of continuity.

Some community papers are political, whereas others are advertising revenue-oriented, depending on who runs the business. It is difficult to generalise community newspapers, and an overview of the entire picture has not been provided in recent academic literature.

2.4.2 CATV community channel

Cable television (CATV) in Japan spread in the 1960s with the development of communal antennas in hard-to-view areas, with the idea of having regional broadcasts on vacant

channels. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the ministries and agencies that found a way to revitalise regions through independent broadcasting focused on cable television as the medium for disseminating regional information, rather than using the centralised image transmissions from Tokyo. As the medium was originally designed to increase the image quality of terrestrial and satellite television, the focus was on multichannel broadcasting, and the degree of emphasis on broadcasting for the community depended on each company's policy. The type of programming produced on cable television varies considerably from station to station. Many stations broadcast daily programs that provide positive community news, such as coverage of school or sporting events, exhibitions, and announcements of municipal offices, whereas some stations with richer financial resources produce hard-boiled documentaries and live coverage of local congresses.

Currently, the national penetration rate of cable television is 52.5%, with more than half of the population watching television via cable (Japan CATV Renmei, 2022). In competition with national or global telcos, Japanese cable TV have also expanded into telecommunication services, such as internet and telephone, since 2000. According to the FY 2021 data, CATV operators derive 35% of their revenue from broadcasting, 47% from telecommunications, and 18% from other sources. Cable TV stations play additional roles, such as entering new telecommunications industries, including mobile virtual network operators and local 5G services, acting as intermediaries, providing infrastructure, and other vendor mediation services to customers. Compared to community press and community radio, cable television is on a relatively stable business footing because of its connections with the Internet infrastructure. However, it is not easy for a community operator to compete with large telecommunication operators at the national or global level.

From a public-interest journalism perspective, community TV channels can play an important role; however, a number of stations fail to convey even traffic accidents, as both offender and victim are residents of the community. Regarding administrative information, many report the news as announced by the authorities, while programs seldom explain what has been decided and how it affects people (Ogawa, 2005).

2.4.3 Community radio

Community radio, which emerged in 1992, was established primarily as a useful medium in times of disaster. Their number increased with each disaster, and as of 2022, 339 stations are in operation. In 2003, non-profit broadcasters were launched in Kyoto and have since spread to other regions. They were mainly established through private membership fees and attracted a lot of attention and engagement because broadcasting involved a lot of freedom. Citizens who are critical of local administration have opportunities also participate in discussion programmes on non-profit radio.

According to a 2016 survey, while the financial sources of the community radio were quite diverse, most collected advertising revenues from joint stock companies, while non-profit stations relied on subsidies and membership fee revenues (Matsuura et al., 2017). Community FM was heavily funded by the government in its early years; however, at present, dispersed funding is increasing for reasons such as the ‘potential loss of freedom of speech’ and the non-desirability of managerial decision-making. Similar to newspapers, commercial community FM is more of a social enterprise for the local community, rather than an industry aiming for large profits. Kitago (2009) argued that, unlike terrestrial television, advertising supports and fosters the local radio station. Kato (2008) similarly stated that community radio is a social enterprise that is difficult to carry out as an ordinary enterprise, partly because it is dependent on the characteristics of the founder and partly because advertising effects are not obvious.

In 2016, 67% of the community radio stations broadcasted news, of which 47% provided their own reporting (Hatanaka, 2017). However, although the percentages varied in areas where the local government was involved in the establishment of the station, a certain amount was subsidised by the municipality in most cases. Thus, self-censorship was practised at the outset. Similar to cable television, community radio tends to be reluctant to report controversial topics (e.g., nuclear power-related topics in communities where nuclear power plants are located), needing to maintain a harmonious community: ‘there is no one to talk about such a controversial topic’ and ‘it is not a place where people express opinions that differ from others’ (Matsuura, 2017).

Moreover, the radio has extremely low listenership in Japan. In recent years, the spread of the Internet has led to arguments that radio is unnecessary, resulting in the closure of several heavily city-subsidised community radio stations.

2.5 Alternative funding models for journalism

Newspaper publishers and broadcasters have become accustomed to a two-sided revenue model that targets the reader/audience as sponsors. However, the decline in newspaper circulation and consequent decrease in advertising have led to the search for new sources of funding. Various discussions have concluded that the key is to view journalism as a public good. Media firms, including those in the news industry, produce and distribute public goods; one person’s consumption of a media product does not diminish the ability of another to consume it (Anderson & Gabszewicz, 2006). In addition, media can be regarded as a powerful instrument of education, whose nature and diversity shape the collective values of society. However, the Japanese public does not fully appreciate the educational and democratic significance of journalism (Ogawa, 2023).

Media outlets in English-speaking countries, such as *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*, have potential readers worldwide, thus making their billing models viable. However,

as pointed out by Abernathy's term, 'News Desert', small town press finds it difficult to turn a profit, including investments in digitisation. Furthermore, in Japan, as the supply of news coverage has exceeded demand, with the perception among the majority of people that news coverage should be free of charge (Oda, 2022), the local press is in crisis.

Many studies have explored the establishment of journalism as a non-profit organisation. In the U.S., the large-scale downsizing of mass media companies since the 2010s has been followed by an increase in the number of small, non-profit media outlets providing quality public-interest news and investigative reporting. Globally, the maintenance of sustainable journalism models has been debated. Philanthropic or donation, crowdfunding, membership (Friedland & Konieczna, 2010; Konieczna & Robinson, 2014) and Nordic press support models (Kaufholz, 2020) have all been discussed.

The philanthropic (donation) model has gained prominence with the success of ProPublica. There have been many similar attempts, particularly in the U.S., which has many foundations. Kaye and Quinn (2010) pointed out that non-profit publications funded through philanthropic means are more durable during recession and offer the kind of journalism a democracy needs, such as investigative forms of reporting. However, gaining support over the long term can place the publication under the same pressures as those of a for-profit organisation, or it may risk becoming dependent (Friedland & Konieczna, 2010; Kaye and Quinn, 2010; Wright, Scott, & Bunce, 2019).

Micro-funding and crowdfunding models have also attracted the interest of researchers and practitioners. While they create connections between journalists and supporters (Aitamurto, 2011) and provide opportunities to respond to citizens' needs (Cha, 2020), crowdfunded outlets could be questioned in terms of autonomy and objectivity, which journalists should protect (Carvajal, 2012; Hunter, 2015). Journalism-focused crowdfunding sites such as Spot.Us, while highly anticipated, have also failed the business.

Similar to the crowdfunding model, membership (micro funding) models, such as *Correspondent* in the Netherlands, *Berkeleyside* in the USA and *Bristol Cable* in the UK, have recently gained increasing attention. It is a cooperative model in which members pay a membership fee in return for involvement in the content of coverage, in conjunction with grants and other funding. Unlike crowdfunding, which often involves one-off content, this is a more citizen-participatory model, owing to its long-term community-oriented involvement (Glaser, 2020).

Based on Scandinavian media experiences and recent policy reforms, Allern and Pollack (2017) discussed the necessity of a media policy and a funding system that acknowledge quality journalism as societal knowledge production and a public good. Government subsidies may make sense in Nordic countries, where trust in government is high and democracy is deeply

rooted; however, in countries with authoritarian governments, journalistic independence may be at risk.

Thus, these models are largely dependent on a country's socio-political situation, which limits their universal adoption. In addition, few of these models have been examined academically in Japan, although there have been some discussions in the newspaper industry (Oda, 2022).

3. Methods

Before investigating the state of public-interest journalism at the city/town level, we will first organise and provide an overview of the current financial state of journalism in mass and alternative media, which, to date, has not been discussed in depth. This is particularly significant in Japan, where the influence of national and prefectural mass media has historically been strong, as the managerial viability of community media is likely to be strongly influenced by its ecosystem with other media (Mizukoshi, 2005). As a case study, six community newspapers in one prefecture were analysed to identify their content and funding status. To grasp the current situation, a content analysis of their articles (695) and advertisements (818) of one week (9–15 April 2023) was conducted. Among the six outlets, we selected two different types of newspapers and compared their content and advertising numbers from those 20 years ago, with supplementary interviews of staff members. One (Newspaper A) is in partnership with a prefectural newspaper and publishes 40,000 copies of four newspapers (eight pages) with different titles from different regions as well as online news. Newspaper D, as an independent party, provides administrative and parliamentary oversight and publishes 5,000 copies of a two-page citizen newspaper with no online news sites. Interviews (a president of Newspaper A and an editor-in-chief from Newspaper D, a total 82-minute semi-structured interviews) were also conducted to assess their current challenges and how they foresee digitisation in the future. We also attempted to interview other companies, however, we were refused.

In this study, we also focused on two such initiatives through interviews (a total of 123 minutes of semi-structured interviews). All the interviewees were informed regarding the study's objective and provided their consent prior to the interviews.

All interview data were uploaded to the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software following the thematic analysis procedure.

4. Results

4.1 Funding of the mass media industry

4.1.1 National/prefectural newspapers

As Figure 1 shows, newspaper circulation has been declining in the last two decades. Regarding revenue, whereas advertising revenue in 2021 fell to about 32% of what it was in 2006, sales revenue in 2021 was about 65% of that 15 years ago (Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association, 2022).

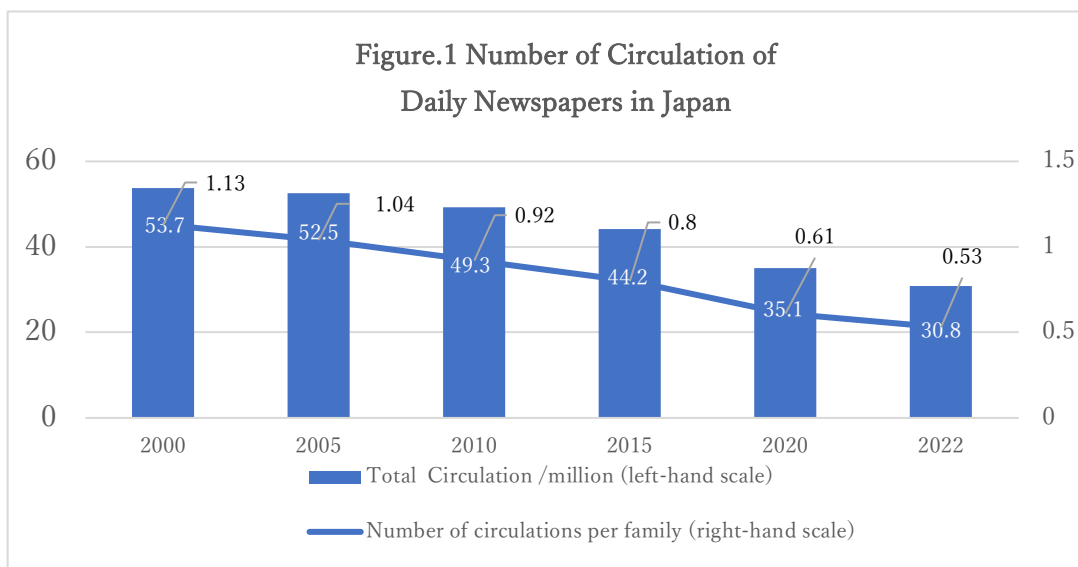


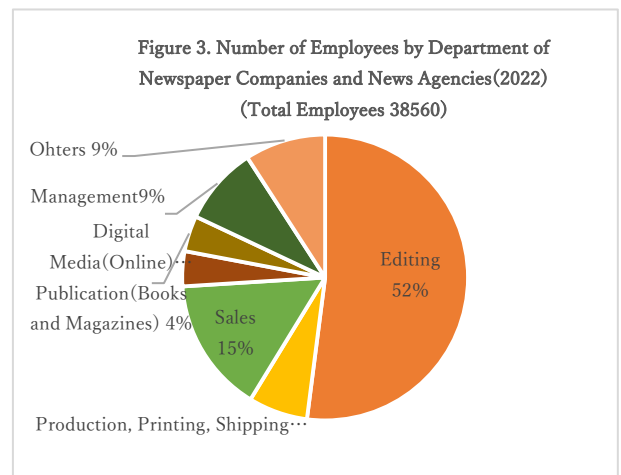
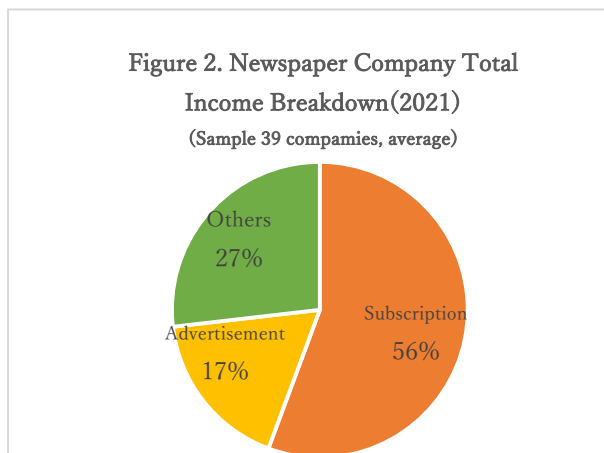
Figure 1. Daily newspaper circulation in Japan

Figure 2 shows the total income breakdown of major newspaper companies (2022), indicating that sales still generate the largest part of newspaper publishers' income, followed by advertising. On average, combined sales and advertising income accounts for 73.1% of the total revenue (The Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association, 2022b). In 2017, approximately 30 million paid newspapers were issued in the U.S., representing a decrease to approximately 57% from the 54.62 million copies in 2004. Compared to the U.S., the decrease in the circulation of Japanese newspapers has been gradual, since the relationship between newspaper companies and national television stations is close (Sakai, 2019).

While newspapers are gradually becoming digital, the number of paying digital subscribers is not well known. Even the second-largest newspaper, Asahi Shimbun, has only 500,000 digital subscribers (IT Media Business, 2022). The shift towards paid articles was also gradual, making it difficult for the public to read public-interest news online.

Therefore, both total circulation and advertising income decreased significantly. However, some news companies have avoided funding crises, so far, by utilising real estate. Being public-service companies, they were given the opportunity to receive prime land at a

discount from the state; therefore, newspaper companies have recently focused on the real estate business as a new pillar of income resources to run their core businesses. Typical examples include Midland Square in Nagoya, built by Mainichi Shimbun together with Toyota in 2007, the Yomiuri Shimbun Marronnier Gate in Tokyo, and the Asahi Shimbun Nakanoshima Festival City in Osaka. For newspapers, the real estate business is not only a profit-seeking business, but



also a funding source for their newspaper sustainability business.

Figure 2. Total income breakdown in newspaper companies.

Simultaneously, the total number of employees decreased by 20% – from 46433 in 2010 to 37284 in 2020 (Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association, 2022b). As Figure 3 shows, newspapers have adapted to difficult situations by reducing the number of print labourers and increasing technological innovation. The staff involved in editing and article production remains the largest, at 52% of the total, followed by sales personnel at 15%; however, the number of personnel related to digitisation, who are considered significant in the next era of newspapers, is quite small, at only 4% of the total (Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association, 2022a). Regarding shipping, the largest newspaper network, Yomiuri, started using its home delivery system to provide delivery services for McDonald’s Hamburg chain (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2021).

Figure 3. Number of employees by department in newspaper companies and news agencies (2022a).

Over the past two decades, Japanese newspapers have avoided major changes, focusing on employment in home delivery system services and newsrooms, with fewer cutbacks to journalists, as in other countries (Sakai, 2021).

4.1.2 Broadcasting

In 2021, 194 commercial broadcasting stations earned a total of 215.65 billion yen. Most sales came from television broadcasting businesses, mainly through commercials. According to a survey by the Japan Commercial Broadcasters Association (2021), TV broadcasting business revenue accounted for 84.5%, while radio revenue, for 4.8% out of the total broadcasting operators' revenue. In NHK's case, 97% of its income comes from fees, with the remainder coming from national subsidies and program sales (Dentsu Media Innovation Laboratory, 2020). The NHK boasts an income and expenditure of approximately 720 billion yen, with approximately 10,000 staff members (Dentsu Media Innovation Laboratory 2020).

Figure 4 and 5 show that Japanese commercial broadcasters have managed to maintain their advertising spending and number of employees. Considering these data, advertising placements for the older generation may continue because the TV viewing time of older people has not decreased much compared with that of young people. In addition, Tokyo stations are beginning to distribute their content directly online rather than through their partner stations. They receive income from advertising, which increases the revenue for Tokyo stations, while the local station revenues are expected to decline sharply. As bearers of public-interest journalism, local stations are still in relatively good health; however, the downsizing of rural branches has begun. In addition, as broadcasting revenues depend on ratings, the news sector must decide whether to report unpopular public-interest news.

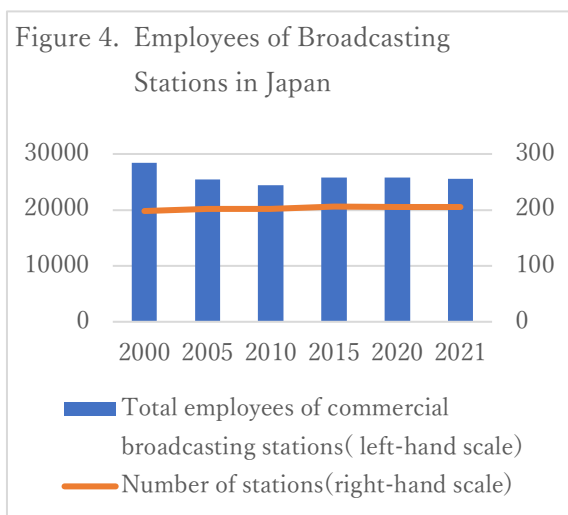


Figure 4. Broadcasting station employees in Japan.

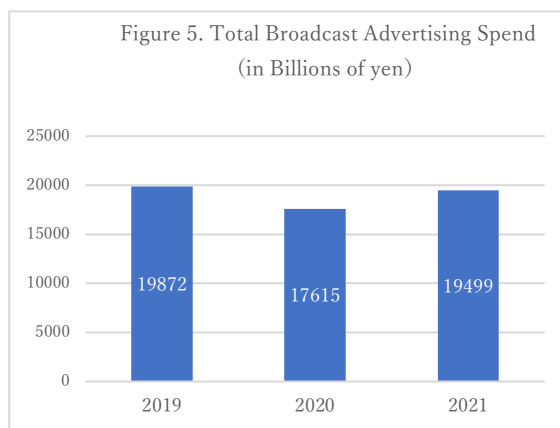


Figure 5. Total broadcast advertising spend (in billions of yen).

Compared with the total sales of these commercial stations, NHK recorded overwhelming sales of 718 billion yen. For comparison, the combined earnings of 33 other radio

and television station operators were just 343 billion yen, and 94 TV-only station operators earned 1,879 billion yen (Dentsu Media Innovation Laboratory, 2020).

4.2 Alternative journalism and its funding system

There are numerous online news sites and applications in Japan, most of which being funded through advertising. Sixty-five percent of the audience read news online, more than 56% watch TV, 28% read social media news outlets, and more than 27% read newspapers (Newman, 2022). *Yahoo! News* is the most common free curated news site in Japan. It reportedly pays each newspaper for the number of clicks they receive per article (each company negotiates on a blanket basis), however, it does not generate revenue equivalent to the number of readers who have migrated online. According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2022, 56% viewed *Yahoo! News* weekly, which is much higher than other legacy media news sites (around 10% on average; Newman, 2022). More recently, a growing number of *YouTube* channels have begun offering commentaries on society and politics.

Most sites that have been developing steadily are foreign-affiliated, such as *HuffPost* in Japan. In May 2021, *HuffPost* and *Buzzfeed Japan* became '*BuzzFeed Japan K.K.*' following a corporate merger from 1 May 2021. *HuffPost Japan* achieved its fourth consecutive profitable year in 2020 with 118% year-on-year growth (HuffPost, 2021). *NewsPicks*, however, are Japanese curation news sites offering economic news from more than 90 domestic and international media outlets, currently having an English version as well. App use is mandatory and has a strong membership for people seeking economic information.

OurPlanet-TV is a non-profit media organisation founded in 2001 that is still in operation with two employees and one part-time worker. Its mission is 'standing together, creating the future' (OurPlanet-TV, 2020). Its aspiration is to share and overcome social issues and create a better future by allowing individual citizens to speak together using a video tool to record and disseminate their voices. In 2005, *OurPlanet-TV* was accredited as a non-profit organisation; in 2016, it was accredited as a certified non-profit organisation with a high degree of public interest, allowing tax-deductible donations. According to an interview with representative H. Shiraishi, many have been donating to the organisation since it was transferred to the Certified Specified Non-Profit Organization system. Owing to the constant coverage of issues that the mass media had not reported after the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, *OurPlanet-TV* gained a certain amount of support and attracted constant donations and subsidies from its members. The media does not receive any advertising funds from businesses or the government, and production costs, of 21 million yen, are supported by membership fees from 242 supporters, onations (7 million yen) as well as business income from video production and workshops. In addition, they utilise their skills as a media company to fundraise through video

productions and projects from educational and social contribution initiatives (OurPlanet-TV, 2023).

InFact (2021) also operates as a non-profit organisation, receiving 2.5 million yen in donations, 1.47 million yen in grants, and 3.5 million yen in commissioned project income in FY 2021 (InFact, 2021). *Frontline Press* is a website where investigative journalists come together to report, distribute articles, and reveal how they have conducted their investigations (Frontline Press, 2021). *Slow News* was once an online news website that aimed to slowly digest and understand the complex world through time-consuming investigative reporting but now uses *NOTE*, a platform for easy dissemination and sharing mainly text-based article content, to pursue journalism through social media.

Unlike media outlets delivering economic news and websites with international affiliations such as the *Huffington Post*, Japanese public-interest web journalism continues to explore funding methods.

4.3 Community papers in the current era

4.3.1 The basic status of community papers in a sample prefecture

As part of the case study, we took the journalism situation in prefecture S, with a population of 3.5 million (Table 1). Prefecture S is located in central Japan, stretching from east to west, and has a well-balanced mix of agriculture, industry, and commerce. It has a prefectural newspaper with a circulation of 483,000 in 2023 as well as an associated local TV station. This paper had twenty-two branches in the prefecture, two of which were closed in March 2023. According to the company, at the time we conducted this study, the number of staff members in their local branches was 3% lower than that in 2003.

Table 1. Prefectural and community newspapers in S prefecture.

	Launch	Version	Circulation	Pages	Website	Online news	Monthly subscription fee
Prefectural	1941	7	483000	32	Yes	Yes/Paywall	¥3300
Community A	1948	4	40000	8	Yes	Yes/Paywall	¥1100
Community B	1950	1	14000	2	Yes	None	¥637
Community C	1962	1	Not open to public	4	No	None	¥1080
Community D	1952	1	7000	2	Yes	None	¥730
Community E	1946	2	Not open to public	8	Yes	Yes/free	¥980
Community F	1953	2	Not open to public	4-8	Yes	None	¥822

The prefectural newspaper competed with a neighbouring large newspaper in the western part of the prefecture, with no city-level newspapers in the area (one paper ceased

publication one years prior), whereas all its six community papers were in the east. Table 1 presents the detailed circulation information of the six daily or almost daily community papers. At least two community newspapers had ceased publication in the past two years. The papers were distributed through major newspaper distributors for a monthly subscription fee of approximately 1000 yen or less. Three papers did not disclose their circulation numbers, nor were they published the news online. The only newspaper that had gone online allowed digital subscription only to those who subscribed to a print newspaper or to residents outside the area who once lived in the region. Overall, these newspapers appeared to have little interest in going online and could not afford to undertake digitisation for younger readers. Hence, their news articles did not appear on the curated news websites.

4.3.2 Content analysis of community papers

Figure 6 shows the results of the content analysis of the proportion of articles in all community newspapers for one week from 9 April 2023. Although newspapers differed, a certain amount of public-interest news, local news, event information, and open calls were generally published, and all newspapers dealt with incidents and accidents in the region.

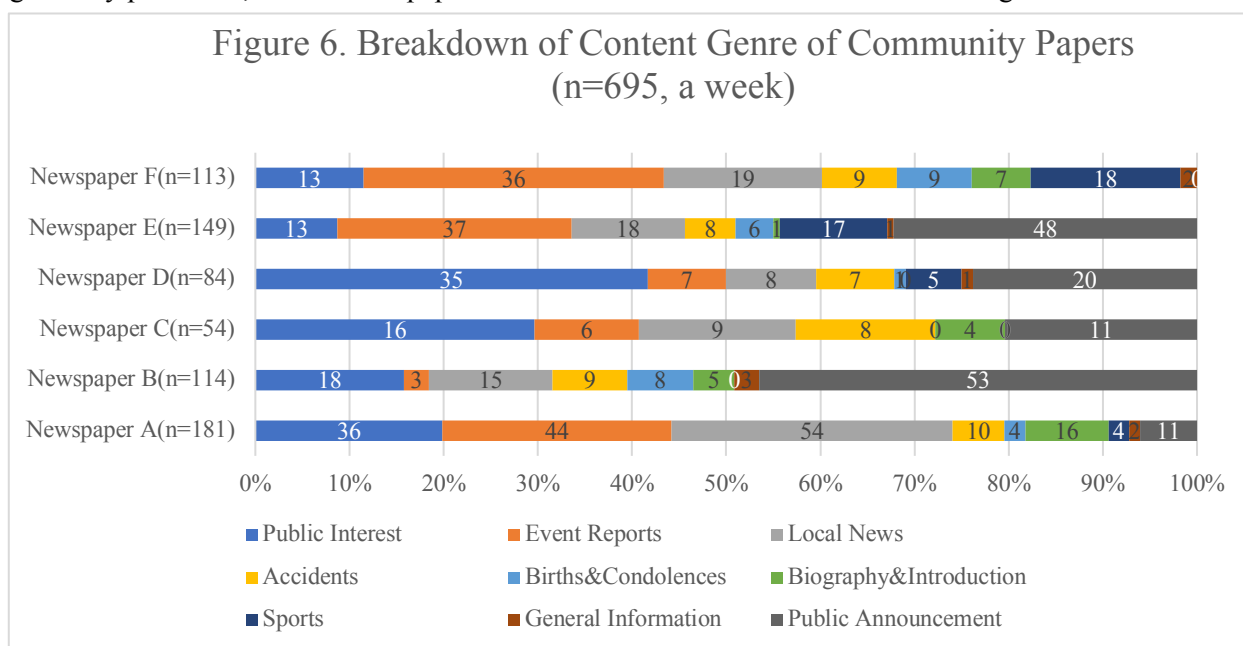


Figure 6. Content genre of community newspapers (n = 695) per one week.

Public-interest news include the information and news necessary for a democratic society, such as local politics and public services, which can affect the future of the community. While a few articles were critical of the local government, as in previous studies, most of the coverage was based on information announced by the municipal office and no investigative journalism pieces were published during the research period. Nevertheless, these articles are

based on detailed coverage that could not be covered by prefectural newspapers, such as interviews with candidates for municipal elections.

Local news is categorised as news that deserves to be part of the community's record, such as reports on school and administrative events as well as community activities. A closer look at these local news stories revealed that they were publicity for companies. A certain proportion of these are so-called local media events, such as events where local banks and shops give prizes to children, or celebrity events organised by companies. General information included cooking recipes and new tools; however, these were less common than expected.

The most common type of information in all the newspapers was 'local event reports', particularly of those related to leisure activities. We counted only those events that were accompanied by coverage and not merely event information. Newspaper A's area is located on the peninsula; therefore, the scope of residents' activities are somewhat predetermined, and the listings of local events are the most popular among its retired readers. The listings of nearly 40 events scheduled over the coming week, along with information from readers and vendors, were regarded as the paper's strongest point.

People's biographies and introductions to local projects were rare. These articles revealed the diverse stories of local communities and shared them with readers. Similarly, the sports-related information covered interviews with residents, bringing them appreciation and rewards. This is a unique value of local newspapers. Interestingly, the articles contained private information that is not conveyed in usual administrative communication, such as awards received by residents at national-level competitions.

4.3.3 Funding community papers

Regarding the current state of advertising in community newspapers, Sjøvaag & Owren (2021) argued that the transformation to programmatic advertising has taken a toll on community-oriented advertising in newspapers. To understand the current state of advertising in community newspapers in S Prefecture, the number of advertisements was calculated in each edition, although advertising prices varied depending on the size of the allocated area.

Compared to 20 years ago, although the number of articles did not appear to have decreased significantly at first glance (Newspaper A, 91% and D, 95%), the number of advertisements dropped (to 67% and 87% for Newspapers A and D, respectively). According to the interviewees, local newspapers often place more than one advertisement for a single ad placement fee, which means that advertising revenue may have been dropping even more.

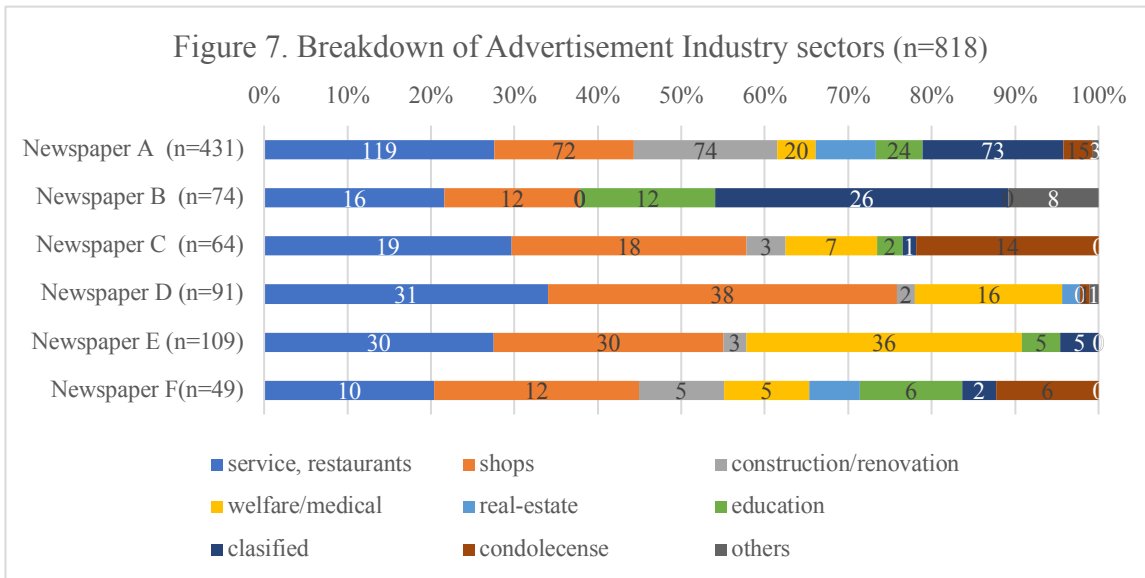


Figure 7. Advertisement industry sectors (n = 818).

The breakdown of the advertising industry varies slightly from newspaper to newspaper; however, most advertisements are related to local services, including restaurants, retail, welfare/medical, and real-estate (Figure 7). Funeral-related information and greetings, known as condolence advertisements, are incorporated into many community newspapers.

Three points were identified from the analysis. First, companies in the same industry must hold competitive posts. For example, in one newspaper, there were advertisements from several stone suppliers – a minor industry – from the perspective of local residents. Conversely, stone suppliers did not advertise in other newspapers. This may be because of the fear of losing business to rivals if they decide to stop advertising. In addition, many advertisements that appeared today appeared 20 years ago as well. As Iwasa (2022) pointed out, subscribers purchase community newspapers with a sense of connection and donation; thus, not only subscriptions but also advertisements might be in a similar situation.

Second, many advertisements are aimed at older readers, as seen in the frequency of advertisements for funeral services and medical/welfare-related businesses. In rural Japanese communities, where the population is ageing, community newspaper advertising remains a viable way to target older populations to a certain extent. The ageing population in the region, where ‘subscriptions are declining by the number of condolence adverts we place’, is a critical situation, with apparently little room for digitisation attempts. Company A, which owns four newspapers and is loosely networked with the prefectural newspaper, acquired an online system for community papers from *Hakodate Shimbum* in the Hokkaido area. However, their main purpose is to maintain news servers, and the papers are not yet intended to be made profitable

as an online service for young people. According to the interviews, the newspapers appeared to have abandoned attempts to attract younger readers online.

Third, very little advertising came from the public administration. National newspapers and prefectural cities had more administrative advertisements. However, advertisements from the city were not found, although many announcements were made in community papers. This is very different from community radio, which receives significant support from municipal governments.

4.4 The emergence of volunteer journalism in local communities

In addition, while traditional public-interest local newspapers have lost sight of their future, some examples of individual community journalism have emerged. It should be explained as a new attempt in Japan. The situation at *Yakushima Post*, located on a World Natural Heritage island, and *Watchdog Otsu*, located in Otsu City, Shiga Prefecture, where the prefectural media have less influence, was analysed through interviews. Both are web-based investigative journalism projects set up by local residents themselves in areas lacking regional media and are similar in being a side project to the founders' main jobs.

Yakushima Post is a web-based local investigative reporting initiative launched by a former national newspaper reporter who moved to the island to report on environmental issues at the World Heritage Site, together with residents, at their request. Yakushima is a small town with no substantial oversight by any branch of prefectural media. Reporting started when residents became aware of irregularities among the mayor and councillors. Although they did not know how to make accusations, they turned to Takeda, a former journalist, for help. Currently, they pay for requests for official documents and transport costs. The media once tried crowdfunding, but although 'Yakushima' is valued as a World Heritage Site, it did not raise much money for investigative reporting of administrative injustice. However, the attempt attracted attention through a post on a crowdfunding website, which resulted in a journalism award with prize money to cover the immediate costs of the activity; however, future funding options have not yet been decided.

T. Takeda, a former journalist leading the initiative, points out that the mass media at the prefectural level initially reported on corruption with some interest but soon stopped reporting. Furthermore, the disclosure of hidden injustices has led to the scattering of slanderous flyers, revealing that it is not easy for residents to denounce the injustices of power in a small community.

Conversely, Takeda stated that reporting on the web would result in the issue being passed on to central government ministries, and that it could be operated quite simply as no costs are involved in publishing using the web. However, it would be easier to work if the costs of document disclosure requests and travel expenses could be obtained in some form.

Similarly, *Watchdog Otsu* is an investigative website reporting on municipal administration conducted by a female social worker together with a university professor. M. Oi, who runs *Watchdog Otsu* on her own, also pays the costs of document disclosure requests herself, pointing out that her activities have brought tension among the local administrators in their areas. The setting up of the media was appreciated by local government officials, who were able to refuse unreasonable offers from councillors, saying that ‘the media is watching us’. She herself considers this journalistic activity a hobby and pays tens of thousands of yen from her income. She works four days a week as a social worker and one day as a volunteer journalist.

5. Discussion

First, this research revealed that Japanese newspapers, from broadsheets to community newspapers, are struggling to monetise not only in print but also on the Internet. It became clear that community newspapers were not keen to go online due to a sustained print demand from older members of their community, despite advertising being taken over by other commercial free newspapers and the Internet. As discussed thus far, although the dismissal of journalists and the discontinuation of newspaper publications have been relatively more limited than in other countries, the contraction of Japanese newspaper journalism seems inevitable, as in other countries, and it is predicted that the ‘news desert’ situation will spread in Japan in the near future. If the situation continues, these community papers will eventually disappear.

Although most of the community papers have avoided directly criticising or encouraging confrontation among community residents for fear of unduly influencing local politics, they have continued to fulfil certain tasks of providing public-interest news as well as to promote documentation and communication in the area through local news, extensive amounts of event announcements, municipal information, as well as local advertisements and classifieds. The analysis further revealed fewer advertisements from the public administration than in national newspapers. While relying on advertising from the administration may discourage critical reporting, it is conceivable that the municipal administration could provide support through a community radio or the Scandinavian subsidy system.

Digitisation in the Japanese newspaper industry has been very slow, particularly for some community newspapers, for which no websites could be found. Furthermore, no obvious future roadmap was provided during the interviews. The focus was on how long the current situation could persist, partly because of the age of the staff involved. The reason lies in Japan’s ageing society, which maintains a residual demand for advertising from older generations, resulting in newspapers maintaining profitability. The umbrella model of layering newspaper publishing at diverse regional levels (Rosse, 1980) is maintained here. Going online is an extreme hurdle for traditional community papers, and they are unsure of how to connect with

younger generations. A number of entertainment- and commercial-oriented regional coupon papers are popular among younger residents, as is *Web Keizai Shimbun*, led and networked by local advertising companies all over Japan; however, they focus on local events and rarely cover public-interest news. National web-based journalism has a similar attitude toward daily public-interest news. The younger generation in Japan reportedly has little political interest. Therefore, there is no need for a revenue-oriented coupon paper that has evolved from advertising to deal with stodgy local politics and public-interest news. If the situation remains the same, community papers and public-interest journalism in the local community will eventually cease to exist.

Second, alternative Japanese journalism, albeit only slightly, was built on a donation or volunteer basis. This model shows that even if the numbers are small, donations and legacy donations from people dissatisfied with current mass-media journalism are not impossible; however, the amount is extremely small compared to other countries, such as the U.S. In addition, this study examined the existence of voluntary journalistic activity and initiatives belonging to those dissatisfied with mass-media journalism. An earnest practice of conducting investigative journalism in the surrounding areas was observed. While not particularly young, the leaders of these media outlets use the Internet to spread their work; however, these initiatives require technical and financial support to continue their activities, which may also apply to community newspapers operating on a small scale. However, it is difficult for them to receive support from foundations, as there are fewer foundations in Japan than in Europe and the U.S.

6. Conclusion

As journalism is becoming more donation- and fund-driven worldwide, the question is how to insert less-attractive public-interest news within the smartphone, which has become the main battleground of the attention economy and the shifting popularity of various platforms. In response, two problems must be addressed in Japan.

First, the necessity of journalism needs to be discussed in media and education. The Japanese public is largely unaware of the role of journalism and its management models. The population does not fully share a democratic sense of crisis over the lack of public-interest journalism. As Hanada (2020) pointed out, even mass-media journalism does not fully fulfil the watchdog function. The fact that broadcasting in Japan is under the direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of General Affairs and the watchdog role played by newspapers are rarely discussed. Moreover, readers and audiences have only a vague knowledge of and interest in what community media means in their lives. Therefore, although they may be sponsors or readers on a kind of ‘socialising’ basis, they are not actively interested in supporting the survival of journalism. More people should appreciate the significance of public-interest journalism and investigative reporting. Media literacy in Japan tends to focus on issues such as how to identify

fake news, whereas awareness of the role of the media in a democratic society is weaker. In the future, it will be necessary to consider how to foster media literacy among residents regarding local media infrastructure and management. Maintaining the distribution of public information is insufficient for promoting free competition. From the perspective of ‘information autonomy’, people need to thoroughly think about new mechanisms for distributing highly public information. Is it possible for newspaper publishers to increase their income and reduce the cost of publishing by devising online sales and developing businesses that utilise newspaper publishers’ brand power (such as educational businesses)?

Second, it is necessary to promote networking with other media and organisations. Non-profit and non-governmental organisations have also become leading players in this field. They are improving their skills and ability to present and investigate focused issues in which the mainstream media has stopped engaging for various reasons. In other words, the monitoring of power may no longer be exclusive to professional journalists and mainstream media (Hanada, 2020). In particular, ombudspersons, introduced to Japan from Nordic countries in the 1990s, could be important players in this field, although the ageing of the profession has also become a problem. Regarding the collaboration with the other media, among the many types, cable television is relatively successful among community media, partly because it is within the telecommunications business, and is producing some excellent documentaries. In addition, unlike community radio, it is not supported by funding from municipalities. In the future, as ‘news deserts’ become more widespread, cable television may become more aware of its journalistic roles and utilise its digital capabilities. Collaboration between community papers and cable TV should be explored before expertise in news-gathering is lost. In addition, social media can disseminate information free of charge. Citizen-driven entrepreneurial journalism, such as *Yakushima Post* and *Watchdog Otsu*, can be created by using social media in other places for donations or memberships. The membership model is also significant in attracting more people to journalism, possibly leading to local democracy.

Finally, it is necessary to establish an intermediary organisation to support alternative and entrepreneurial journalism as well as traditional community papers from managerial, systemic, and educational perspectives. Around the world, various organisations – foundations, public broadcasters, and universities – support such significant attempts. In Japan, universities and institutions should actively consider playing this role in the future of the public interest in journalism and democracy.

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