PUBLIZISTIK

Media politics in Japan: News journalism between interdependence, integrity, and influence

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Abstract Although Japan is generally considered a liberal democracy with a free press, concerns about media independence have repeatedly been raised. The World Press Freedom Index ranks Japan last among G7 nations. One of the major reasons for its performance lies in a deep-rooted entanglement of the mainstream media with the political establishment, which is said to promote a climate of self-censorship and impede courageous, critical journalism. While the government-approved reporters' clubs ("kisha clubs") are often cited as lying at the heart of the problem, there are other relevant structural and historically grown factors hindering the improvement of press freedom: Despite theoretical constitutional protection, media governance in Japan does not provide an adequate framework for journalistic independence; furthermore, revolving door politics, editorial interventions and informal arrangements are well-established practices inside the sphere of media and politics. Nevertheless, there have been those critical moments when the mainstream media, in fact, influenced the course of politics. Setting out from the present condition of media democracy in Japan, this article traces back the historical roots of the seemingly firmly ingrained relationship between journalism and the state. Thereby, it portrays the ambivalent interdependence between the media and politics, and the dilemmatic tension between journalistic integrity, economic interests, and political influence. Finally, it explains why the current hegemony of the legacy media in the public sphere may eventually face a silent, but profound transformation in light of digitization and advancements in artificial intelligence.

Keywords Japan · Media independence · Media governance · Self-censorship · Kisha club · Digitization

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Politik und Medien in Japan: Nachrichtenjournalismus zwischen Abhängigkeit, Integrität und Einfluss

Zusammenfassung Obwohl Japan allgemein als liberale Demokratie mit freier Presse gilt, werden immer wieder Bedenken hinsichtlich der Unabhängigkeit der Medien geäußert. Die Rangliste der Pressefreiheit der Reporter ohne Grenzen stuft Japan als das Schlusslicht unter den G7-Nationen ein. Einer der Hauptgründe für diese Bewertung liegt in einer tief verwurzelten Verflechtung der Mainstream-Medien mit dem politischen Establishment, die ein Klima der Selbstzensur fördert und mutigen, kritischen Journalismus erschwert. Während die offiziellen Reporterklubs („Kisha-Clubs") oft als Kern des Problems gesehen werden, gibt es auch andere relevante strukturelle und historisch gewachsene Faktoren, die eine nachhaltige Verbesserung der Pressefreiheit behindern: Trotz theoretischem verfassungsrechtlichem Schutz bietet die Medienregulierung in Japan keinen hinreichenden Rahmen für journalistische Unabhängigkeit; außerdem sind fliegende Postenwechsel zwischen Politik, Wirtschaft und Medien („Drehtür-Effekt"), redaktionelle Eingriffe und informelle Absprachen etablierte Praktiken in der Medienlandschaft. Dennoch gab es auch immer jene kritischen Momente, in denen die Mainstream-Medien tatsächlich den Lauf der Politik beeinflussten. Ausgehend vom gegenwärtigen Zustand der Mediendemokratie in Japan zeichnet dieser Artikel die historischen Wurzeln der auf den ersten Blick fest verankerten Beziehung zwischen Journalismus und Staat nach. Dabei liegt besonderes Augenmerk auf der ambivalenten gegenseitigen Abhängigkeit von Medien und Politik sowie dem Drahtseilakt zwischen journalistischer Integrität, wirtschaftlichen Interessen und politischem Einfluss. Schließlich wird erläutert, wie und weshalb der derzeitigen Hegemonie der etablierten Medien in der Öffentlichkeit angesichts der Digitalisierung und den Fortschritten in der künstlichen Intelligenz eine stille, aber tiefgreifende Transformation bevorstehen könnte.

Schlüsselwörter Japan · Medienunabhängigkeit · Media Governance · Selbstzensur · Kisha-Club · Digitalisierung

1 Introduction

Long touted as "an economic giant but a political dwarf" (Heng 2021, p. 9), little attention has generally been paid to politics in Japan. Facing multiple global challenges, such as Russia's war in Ukraine, rising geopolitical tensions in East Asia, and the climate crisis, however, many democratic countries have begun to (re-)discover Japan as an indispensable, reliable political partner in the Asia-Pacific region. Be it in the field of security policy, in renewable energy development, or in artificial intelligence research, Japan has returned onto the stage of global diplomacy as the country is proactively expanding its ties with international partners (Emanuel 2024; Kyōdō 2024). For understanding Japan's political system, public debates, and state actors' motivations, it helps to explore the media's role in the politics of the East Asian nation.

This article sheds light on the intricate relationship between media and politics in Japan. Anchored in a diverse media landscape ranging from influential national newspapers to independent publishing houses, the country's political discourse is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including historical legacies, technological advancements, and politico-economic dependencies. While mainstream media often exhibit a degree of deference to government authorities, there have always been moments in history when the media (at times actively, at times unintentionally) shaped the course of political events. Contrariwise have political players over time become savvier in using the media to their advantage and doing politics successfully through the media.

When politics becomes intrusive towards journalism, media independence is jeopardized. While Japan has often been lauded for its commitment to democratic ideals, a closer examination reveals a more nuanced and, at times, precarious state of media affairs. Japan presently stands at a 70th position in the World Press Freedom Index 2024, last among the Group of Seven nations. In 2017, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of expression concluded upon his mission that there were "significant worrying signals" with regard to journalistic autonomy in Japan, as seen in government pressure on the media, limited space for public debate, and increased restrictions on information access (U.N. Human Rights Council 2017, p. 18).

The paradox of limitations to media independence despite the country's image as a liberal democracy arises from the coexistence of democratic principles and subtle, yet influential, dynamics that cast a shadow over a media landscape characterized by numerous "no-go areas", i.e., prominent taboo topics, and habitual self-censorship in mainstream journalism. Despite Japan's reputation as a society that cherishes freedom of expression, the developments, particularly during the Abe tenure (2012–2020), laid bare the fragile state of journalistic autonomy in the face of political pressures and entrenched structural dependencies. Delving into the multifaceted layers of Japanese media politics[1], it becomes evident that press freedom enjoys relatively strong protection only in theory[2], but that there are a number of structural and historically grown factors hampering the rise of a courageous, critical mainstream journalism. By exploring the intricate interplay between Japan's political landscape and media autonomy, this article aims to dissect the factors influencing the workings of the Japanese media, revealing the delicate balance between journalistic integrity, economic interests, and political influences. These influences have promoted a rather uniform, conservative type of news journalism, yet there have

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[1] This article conceives the term "media politics" as covering the relationship between the media and the political process (Iyengar 2023). This primarily aims at exploring how politics impacts media and vice versa, i.e., inquiring how politicians use media to communicate with the public (e.g., electoral campaigns, communication strategies), and how media influence public opinion and political agendas (e.g., through its coverage of political affairs). As a political impact on the media, this also encompasses the realm of media regulation and control, i.e., media policy in a wider sense. Underlying meta themes for media politics are those relevant to democratic theory, i.e., questions of press freedom, political accountability, media structures (Puppis 2023, pp. 20–23), and the functioning of the public sphere (Habermas 1996). Correspondingly, the term "media democracy" also refers to an increased interdependence between the political and the media sphere in the democratic system (Sarcinelli 2012).

[2] Freedom of expression is guaranteed under Article 21 of the Japanese constitution.

been cases when public discourse developed extraordinarily vibrant and, at times, unexpected dynamics, eventually forcing the political establishment to make concessions. As we navigate the historical trajectory of media politics in Japan, the contingencies of this development become clear, meaning that this trajectory need not have necessarily taken the way it took, but instead was shaped by multiple causes of socio-political, economic, global, and technological nature in specific historical contexts. The pursuit of a truly independent media in Japan has been an ongoing struggle, reflective of the broader challenges faced by developed nations on their way towards liberal democracies elsewhere. Finally, the analysis of media politics in a non-Western liberal democracy adds a much-needed transnational perspective to current debates on press freedom, media regulation, and the structural transformation of an increasingly fragmented public sphere.

2 Japan's media landscape

2.1 The inside-media

Japan's media landscape is characterized by an oligopoly of public broadcaster NHK (*Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*, in English: Japan Broadcasting Corporation) and five large commercial conglomerates each consisting of a newspaper and a television business. These conglomerates are generally referred to as the "*Big Five*": Yomiuri Shimbun & Nippon Television; Asahi Shimbun & TV Asahi; Mainichi Shimbun & TBS[3]; Sankei Shimbun & Fuji Television; Nikkei Shimbun & TV Tokyo. With an annual budget of around 650 billion yen (2023), NHK represents one of the largest public service media next to German ARD/ZDF and the BBC. The five private conglomerates and the public broadcaster form a distinctive 5 + 1 oligopolistic structure that exert overwhelming influence in the nation's information sphere. Together with the two news agencies Kyōdō News and Jiji Press they make up what Prusa calls the "*inside-media*" (2024, p. 84). The term "inside-media"[4] hints at the central positioning of these organizations in Japan's media landscape.

This becomes manifest in a few characteristics: The inside-media maintain *historically close ties to state institutions*. Not only is this obvious through a dense network of personal relationships, but this press-politics relationship is quasi-institutionalized, first and foremost through the reporters' club system ("kisha clubs", in Japanese), a system criticized to constitute "information cartels" (Freeman 2000). Kisha clubs represent news-gathering associations of journalists affiliated with particular news organizations. These clubs focus their reporting around press rooms established by key sources like the Prime Minister's Official Residence, govern-

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[3] Mainichi Shimbun and TBS represent an outlier among the Big Five as there is no formal (cross-)shareholding between these two nowadays. However, there was one in the past, and traditionally there has been a close editorial cooperation between Mainichi and TBS which is why these two are usually associated with each other.

[4] The insider-outsider dichotomy in regard to the Japanese media and political system was originally used, albeit in different contexts, by Pharr (1996), Farley (1996), and Freeman (2000).

ment ministries, local authorities, or corporations. Although their exact number is unknown, estimates range between 600 and 1000 clubs nationwide (Freeman 2000, p. 68). The kisha clubs wield significant influence in the Japanese media landscape, being comprised of both print and broadcast journalists who enjoy exclusive access to press conferences and privileged access to confidential sources. However, club membership is largely limited to employees of mainstream media outlets, the above-mentioned "inside-media". This is why the inside-media are sometimes called as well the "kisha club media"(see Chap. 4 for more details).

Furthermore, the "inside-media" possess *significant economic power*. Unlike structural transformation seen in journalism elsewhere, which has left many traditional media businesses feeble, the Japanese mainstream media has remained relatively robust and has not (yet) undergone relentless restructuring. Japan's media conglomerates operate a rich portfolio of vertically integrated television channels, newspapers, magazines, and book publications. They still boast ample financial resources, not least due to their deep involvement in non-media related businesses, such as real estate. Long-term relationships with major businesses across Japan, and only slowly changing consumer habits, have helped to absorb part of the headwinds coming along with the digital transformation. Unsurprisingly, the inside-media's political and economic capital have consolidated their *enormous influence in the public sphere*. Over most part of Japan's postwar history, public broadcaster NHK and the country's major newspapers, and later the affiliated television stations, have had the undisputed hegemony in building public opinion (Tsuchiya 2023).

2.2 The outside-media

Opposed to the "inside-media", there have traditionally been the "*outside-media*" (Prusa 2024, p. 84) found at the margins of the media landscape. These are the news magazines (e.g., the weeklies), local newspapers, the foreign press, and online media. The outside-media are characterized by their relative distance to the key institutions in politics, bureaucracy, and business. In general, they do not belong as permanent members to the kisha clubs and instead need to develop their own ways of getting access to sources and information. As they cater to more specific audiences, their range and impact is far more limited. Nevertheless, the outside-media fulfill a crucial role: Their peripheral standing in the public sphere allows them to report more freely and critically on a wider range of topics. Particularly the weekly magazines, such as Shūkan Bunshun or Shūkan Gendai, are known for their scoops that have shaken the political establishment from time to time. It is not unusual for the inside-media to take up the weeklies' scandal reporting, which thereupon unfolds into major national news stories.

In fact, at times, the mainstream media outlets make use of the fringe and less controlled positioning of the outside-media: Knowing that they are restrained to publish it themselves, the "kisha club media" forward delicate, sensitive information to the weeklies to have them publish the story, which again later may be picked up by the mainstream media. These entanglements between inside- and outside-media cannot belie the power imbalance between the mainstream and the peripheral media: In order to receive national attention for their news stories, the weeklies,

local newspapers, and foreign press, are dependent on NHK and the five media conglomerates. Ultimately, the latter are the gatekeepers deciding which news stories will make it on the nation-wide agenda (For a holistic and systematic overview of the structure of the Japanese media landscape, see Buchmeier, 2024).[5]

3 Continuities and change in Japan's postwar media politics

3.1 The legacy of the "1940 system"

For most of the postwar period, Japanese newspapers have been known for their record-high circulation figures, particularly in international comparison. At their peak, in 1997, 53.8 million newspapers were sold every day. The leading newspapers, Yomiuri Shimbun and Asahi Shimbun, were selling more than ten (Yomiuri) and eight (Asahi) million daily copies. The Yomiuri was even awarded a world record for its enormous circulation in the Guiness Book in 2010. For many households it was common to subscribe to not only one, but two newspapers.[6] It is often said that this remarkable success of the newspaper industry was the result of an effective democratization in the postwar years, the nation's economic boom, and the rise of a prosperous middle class with a strong appetite for information and education (Noguchi 2019; Satomi 2021). This is the official, popular story. What is less known, however, is that the very foundation of the big newspapers' postwar success was originally laid during the wartime years. In the run-up to the Pacific War and as a total national mobilization, the Japanese government carried out sweeping reforms that would turn the industry into a war economy. With the aim of a nation-wide "Gleichschaltung" and a more effective control of public opinion, from 1938 to 1942, the newspaper industry was drastically restructured to "one newspaper per prefecture". At the same time, only a handful of newspapers were licenced to operate nationally—these were the "*Big Three*", the Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri. In the postwar period, they would be joined by two newspapers that had originated as business newspapers, the Nikkei Shimbun and the Sankei Shimbun, but the "*Big Three*" newspapers would continue to form the core of the contemporary oligopoly of the "*Big Five*" national dailies.

What had been a relatively independent and diverse pre-war press landscape of thousands of (partly unofficial) local and regional newspapers was turned by the wartime reforms into a meager, highly concentrated scenery of a few dozens of streamlined papers (Freeman 2000, p. 53). Whereas this massive overhaul limited the range of information, it left a structurally resilient press landscape that outlasted the end of the war, the postwar reform efforts by the American occupation authorities, and ultimately survived up to this day. Ironically, the government-led wartime

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[5] This article primarily addresses the role of the Japanese mainstream media in the political landscape as they are authoritative in public discourse. Japan has a surprisingly diverse range of smaller and alternative media that regrettably cannot be covered here due to limitations in length.

[6] Figures according to data by the Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association, in Japanese: Nihon Shinbun Kyōkai (NSK).

consolidation of the press industry contributed to the relative strength of the regional newspapers in their postwar competition vis-à-vis the national dailies while the latter benefitted themselves as most of their pre-war competition had been eliminated (Kasza 1988, pp. 194–231; Satomi 2021, p. 220).

There was another reason why the three national dailies actually came out strengthened from the war period. It is a common narrative to bemoan the state of the press in totalitarian systems. Obviously, the local and smaller newspaper corporations that were ordered to disband or be merged were the victims of the restructuring. The Japanese national press, however, that was allowed to carry on, was harnessed into the government's propaganda apparatus and, as a result, was thriving as commercial enterprises. Jumping onto the bandwagon of nationalistic euphoria, the mainstream newspapers considered the war a lucrative business chance to attract an increasingly bellicose readership, and steadily expanded their sales while enjoying the state's priority supply for ink and paper (Satomi 2021).

The major structural transformation in the press landscape during wartime needs to be seen in the wider context of a fundamental shift in Japan's political economy at that time. This transformation resulted in what is known as the "1940 system", i.e., socio-economic structures established against the background of Japan's transition to a war economy that resisted the postwar reforms and significantly shaped the trajectory of Japan during the latter part of the 20th century. Contrary to the popular narrative that it was democratization and demilitarization that contributed to Japan's economic miracle in the postwar years, it was rather the streamlined, highly efficient industry structures that now drove economic growth. Key characteristics of the "1940 system", amongst others, were a strong centralization towards the capital of Tokyo, a high degree of industry concentration and a pronounced vertical integration of industries (so-called keiretsu structures), all with the aim of increasing state control and establishing efficient chains of command (Buchmeier 2020a; Noguchi 1998, 2019).

The newspaper industry was no exception to this nation-wide, wartime transformation and, when political constraints of the military regime were removed postwar, they substantially profited from their oligopoly status in an information environment now considered free, at least on paper. In fact, starting in the 1950s, the large newspapers significantly expanded their market dominance by integrating television broadcasting into their growing media empires. Freeman (2000, pp. 142–143) describes the results and implications for Japan's media landscape as follows:

"Virtually the entirety of the commercial television broadcasting industry in Japan is under the control of one of the five national newspapers, which send executives to help with their management and own a substantial share of their equity capital. The early entrance into this new medium by the newspaper press was supported by state policies that encouraged the organizing of television stations under a vertical control structure, with the major newspapers at the top. The mutual interests of the state and the newspaper industry intersected: by linking the new broadcast media to a keiretsu led by club member newspapers,

they could severely limit their ability to report news independently of their parent organizations and prevent the rise of an alternative mainstream media in Japan."

Separating the ownership of print and broadcasting media is a major concern in many democracies. For it is believed that a diversification of media ownership supports the plurality of information. In the US, for instance, the media regulator FCC passed a rule in 1975 that banned the cross-media ownership of a daily newspaper and a broadcast station in the same market (Edge 2008). In Japan, such concerns did not prevail. There, the consequence of postwar media policies was that state authorities allowed the major private newspapers to take control over television broadcasting. As a result, ownership of print and broadcasting media was in one hand. At the same time, the government retained significant leverage over the information flow in the mainstream media via the kisha club system. This is how ultimately a media oligopoly of vertically controlled, cross-owned conglomerates became established, forming a market environment virtually immune against any attempts of intrusion by competitors.

3.2 The transition from the radio to the television era

Prior to World War II, radio broadcasting in Japan was restricted to NHK, which was organized as a state-run broadcaster. At that time, NHK did not engage in independent news production as understood today. Instead, the news primarily consisted of selecting and reading out newspaper reports after they had been approved by the Ministry of Communications (Krauss 2000, pp. 53–56; Ousaka, 2014, p. 125).

Despite a sluggish start due to weak economic conditions in the 1920s, NHK's audience grew significantly during Japan's military actions in China, starting with the Mukden Incident[7] in 1931. The urgency of war news spurred the adoption of radio, with NHK reaching one million licenses by February 1932. Throughout the 1930s, radio became vital for maintaining the state-public relationship and supporting military endeavors. However, by the end of 1938, radio penetration in Japan remained low compared to Western European nations and the US. Efforts intensified to ensure broader access, including setting up so-called "radio towers" across the country. These "radio towers" were public radio receivers in concrete or wooden structures of about a height of 2–3 meters erected around Japan at the initiative of NHK. By 1942, the country's political leadership and NHK saw radio as essential for national survival, promoting its presence in public spaces like department stores, restaurants, schools, and railway stations. This widespread availability eventually made radio an omnipresent medium in urban Japan (Koga-Browes 2023, pp. 522–526).

The post-war period marked significant changes for NHK and the broader media environment. As Japan rebuilt itself, NHK was reformed into a "public broadcaster" and began developing its own news department. This development was a gradual process. In fact, before NHK's reputation in the news sector became established in

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[7] The Mukden Incident was a false flag operation by the Japanese military in September 1931 as a pretext for the subsequent invasion of Manchuria.

the 1960s, there had been a "division of labor" between private broadcasters and NHK. During the 1950s, private broadcasters were known for their information programs, while NHK was known for entertainment. The background of this perhaps surprising division of roles was that the private broadcasters arose from the newspaper business, thus having access to an extensive news network and corresponding competencies. In contrast, having been a mere "transmitter" of official information until the end of the war, NHK did not possess noteworthy competencies in news journalism. By around the end of the 1960s, however, NHK had established its dominance in the news and information sector, particularly through television news (Krauss 2000, pp. 53–56; Matsuda 2014, pp. 66–68; Ousaka 2014, pp. 124–127).

Private radio, in general, never played a significant role as news media in Japan. NHK's dominance in the radio sector has been longstanding and unchallenged. When Japanese people listen to the radio, it is usually NHK. Two major reasons contributed to this development. Firstly, since commercial television started its operations as early as 1953, only two years after commercial radio broadcasting had been launched, private broadcasters allocated the better part of their resources already towards the new media. Secondly, the whole media landscape shifted with the advent of television, rendering radio soon obsolete. Subsequently, Japan has become less of a radio nation and more of a television nation (Aboud 1992). In Germany, it is common for the radio (or nowadays: podcasts) to be played in the background, whereas in Japan, a television is often running somewhere, even if no one is actively watching. This cultural preference underscores the importance of television in Japanese daily life.

On the other hand, private broadcasters became strong contenders in the television sector from the 1950s onwards, with Nippon Television starting operations in 1953. This period marked the beginning of a competitive media environment where private television networks could thrive alongside NHK. While Japan's broadcasting system might appear to have a "dual structure" similar to Germany's at first glance, one needs to keep in mind that Japan's dual broadcasting structure, unlike in Germany, existed since the very beginning of the television era.

3.3 US occupation policies: Fostering democracy, censoring the press

The role and impact of the US occupation policies in postwar Japan (1945–1952) has been a much-debated topic until today. For a long time, the wide-spread, popular notion had prevailed that 1945 had meant a cut in the history of modern Japan, and that Japan's successful transformation into a democratic and prosperous country was owed to those postwar years. Major historical works over the last few decades, however, have helped adding more nuance to this narrative, stressing the ambiguities of the postwar period and shifting the focus to the continuities that persisted (Bix 2016; Dower 1999; Noguchi 2019).

The policy impact the US military administration had specifically on the Japanese media landscape has received little attention so far. Yet, questions arise, particularly when it is compared with what occurred in Germany. There, all print businesses, newspapers, and broadcasters were suspended and dissolved as soon as the Allied Powers had taken over administration. For a few months the military press

(German: Heeresgruppenzeitungen) run by the occupation forces provided German citizens with information. Next, publishing licences were stepwise granted to Germans who were not obviously involved with the Nazi regime. From 1949 onwards, the "old-regime publishers" (German: Altverleger) were allowed to reestablish their businesses. However, many of them failed to succeed as the young, emerging newspapers had already gained notable positions in the press landscape (Pöttker 2010; Pürer 2015, pp. 50–53; Stöber 2014, pp. 150–153). It is fair to say that, while acknowledging that continuities did exist (e.g., well-known publisher Franz Burda), overall, the German media landscape went through a major postwar overhaul.

In Japan, policies adopted by the SCAP (Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers) took quite a different approach. Whereas the media landscape in its structure remained basically untouched, the US occupation forces under General Douglas MacArthur installed an extensive, elaborate censorship apparatus. Instead of renewing the structures of the press industry, ironically enough, they hoped to promote a democratic mindset by controlling public opinion and information flow through the existing structures. Although the SCAP initially set out to implement democratic principles of freedom of speech and opinion, the scope of the Civil Censorship Detachment (CCD), the agency in charge, was soon rapidly swelling, rendering the original aims absurd: In the end, more than six thousand employees were involved nationwide in screening and monitoring an immense number of publications, among them major daily newspapers, books, and magazines, news-agency publications, radio scripts as well as films, plays, private mails, and phone conversations. Censorship was practiced until 1949 and was continued in altered manner until Japan officially regained its independence in 1952 (Dower 1999, pp. 406–407).

Slipping from one system of censorship into another, with the former certainly being totalitarian by nature, and the latter being disguised under the label of "democratization", the impact on public discourse and the development of political efficacy among ordinary Japanese citizens was a lasting one:

> "... one legacy of the revolution from above was continued socialization in the acceptance of authority—reinforcement of a collective fatalism vis-à-vis political and social power and of a sense that ordinary people were really unable to influence the course of events. For all their talk of democracy, the conquerors worked hard to engineer consensus; and on many critical issues, they made clear that the better part of political wisdom was silence and conformism. So well did they succeed in reinforcing this consciousness that after they left, and time passed, many non-Japanese including Americans came to regard such attitudes as peculiarly Japanese" (Dower 1999, pp. 439–440).

Oftentimes, Japanese people are described as being conformist and submissive to authority, preventing them from developing a truly democratic mindset. As Dower points out, what often tends to be interpreted as the results of a however defined "Japanese culture", or even inherent "Japaneseness" (Kazufumi and Befu 1993), can actually be traced back, at least in large part, to very concrete historical, sociopolitical circumstances in postwar Japan.

3.4 The "Reverse Course" and the return of the wartime leaders

Despite the ubiquity of persisting structures from the totalitarian regime and the obstacles within the new communication regime under the SCAP, the end of war prompted a wave of awakening grass-roots engagements. In newspapers nationwide, including the Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri, employees began to pressure executives and editorial staff to accept their war responsibility and resign. Between 1945 and 1946, the Yomiuri Shimbun saw one of the fiercest labor strikes in postwar history when its staff were requesting editorial autonomy and the resignation of their management (Dower 1999, p. 242). In public broadcaster NHK, workers asserted the formation of a staff association and ousted its executives that had been sent from the overseeing authorities. These bottom-up movements, however, were soon put down. In the light of the looming Cold War, the US occupation authorities soon reversed their course (the literal "Reverse Course") by shifting policies of democratization and demilitarization towards an economic reconstruction and remilitarization of Japan.[8] In this context of embedding Japan into US geopolitical strategy, concerns of promoting free speech and civil rights became secondary. Quite the contrary, more than ever it became relevant to the US to maintain its influence in Japanese politics if the nation was to serve as a "bulwark against communism in East Asia". Ensuring favorable public opinion in Japan was conducive to this endeavour, and thus the media were a key concern to the SCAP (Dower 1999, pp. 525–562; Kapur 2018, pp. 8–17; Krooth et al. 2015, pp. 1–38).

The Reverse Course policies resulted in several incongruities leaving an enduring legacy up to the present. One far-reaching case was a wave of draconian purges from the late 1940s to the early 1950s, the so-called "red purges", that were targeting union members, politicians, public servants, personnel in schools and universities, and employees in the mass media who were deemed "ultra-leftist". Initiated by the US occupation administration and welcomed by conservative Japanese politicians, state bureaucrats, and corporate managers, the purges removed thousands in the public and private sector. While the purges hit left-wing and communist papers in the beginning, they increasingly aimed at the mainstream press. When the purges reached their peak in 1950, hundreds of employees in the big newspapers, news agencies, public broadcaster NHK, and film industry were dismissed. The purges had a lasting chilling effect on public discourse in Japan, causing the entire closure of progressive and left-leaning publications, a conservative editorial turn for others, and the internalization of journalistic self-censorship.

At the same time, Japanese wartime leaders were rehabilitated across-the-board. This did not occur due to the SCAP's benevolence or by mistake, but was driven by pragmatic, strategic considerations. Many of the former wartime leaders, stemming from the bureaucracy, politics, and military, had extensive networks and, at least in the occupiers' eyes, appeared the most reliable choice for whom to entrust with

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[8] The question of the respective responsibility and agency for the extent and quality of the Reverse Course between the SCAP and the Japanese authorities remains a much-disputed topic in historical research. Krämer (2005) argues that the Japanese authorities' active involvement in shaping concrete policy implementation was in fact more pronounced than previously assumed.

running Japan's political economy. In the hope that these fallen elites would be of use to the country's reconstruction and its transformation into a loyal US ally, thousands were depurged and reinstated in key positions in politics, state administration, the corporate sector, and the media (Kapur, 2018, p. 9). Prominent examples were Nobusuke Kishi and Matsutarō Shōriki, both key figures in wartime politics and media, who, after the war, were imprisoned as suspected "Class A" war criminals but then released in the context of the Reverse Course. Kishi, grandfather of future Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, came to be one of the key players in the formation of the dominant LDP (Liberal Democratic Party) and later became Prime Minister (1957–1960).

Shōriki, proprietor of the Yomiuri Shimbun since 1924, grew into one of the most influential figures in Japan's media and politics as he turned an already successful newspaper business into a "Yomiuri empire" overseeing a nationwide television broadcasting network, sports business (e.g., baseball: Yomiuri Giants), and amusement facilities (e.g., Yomiuriland). In his political role as an ardent advocate of atomic energy and part of the Kishi cabinet, Shōriki came to be known as the "father of Japanese nuclear power". The irony of it was that within ten years after suffering from two atomic bombs, Japan started to embrace nuclear energy. By the mid-1950s Japanese public opinion had already swung from an anti-nuclear to a pro-nuclear sentiment, hoping for the economic benefits of a peaceful utilization of atomic energy for the nation's industrial development. This remarkable transition of public opinion can be attributed to a powerful alliance of US industrial lobbyists, conservative, pro-US Japanese politicians and the rising Yomiuri conglomerate (newspaper and, by then, Nippon Television Network), the latter two backed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and other US intelligence agencies (Krooth et al. 2015; Morris-Suzuki 2014; Wang 2023). As a matter of fact, as declassified US government records later revealed, the CIA covertly financed the Japanese conservative forces, first and foremost the LDP, up to the early 1970s (Weiner 2024).

4 Persisting interdependencies between media and politics

4.1 The failed establishment of an independent media regulator

Contemporary democratic media governance demands media regulation to be separated from political power. Therefore, independent communications agencies are set up in different countries, e.g., the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the USA, the Office of Communications (Ofcom) in the UK, or the regionally organized state media authorities ("Landesmedienanstalten") in Germany. In Japan, an independent media regulator does not exist. This, again, has historical reasons. The US occupation authorities had pushed for a self-governing communication agency, being aware that only an autonomous broadcasting regulator could permanently ensure media freedom. The Yoshida administration (1948–1954), however, strictly opposed such a third-party regulator that would curtail the government's grip on the media. Eventually, General MacArthur put his plans through when he had a Radio Regulatory Commission established in 1950, designed after the model of the

American FCC. But the agency should not last long. Following Japan's return to sovereignty in 1952, Yoshida suspended it and instead transferred its competencies to the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) supervised by the corresponding cabinet minister (Kawabata 2019, pp. 31–61; Krauss 2000, pp. 89–94). The de facto revoking of an independent communications agency at this very early stage of postwar democracy constituted a critical juncture for the further trajectory of Japan's media politics.

4.2 The undermining of public broadcasting

This was not the only case of how a broadcasting policy at arm's length from the state was undermined in the postwar years. Much as there was hope of what was about to be restarted as public broadcaster, these expectations were soon disappointed. When radio broadcasting was introduced in the 1920s in Japan, it was originally planned as a commercial enterprise. As the government quickly realized its enormous value for influencing public opinion, it soon intervened and brought broadcasting under its control. As a result, NHK started as a state-controlled merger of three regional broadcasters (located in Tokyo, Osaka and Nagoya) in 1926 and by the time Japan began its large-scale mobilization for the war NHK had become a propaganda apparatus for the government. After the end of war, the state representatives sitting on NHK's executive board were ousted and, for the first time, the broadcaster enjoyed a more liberal, democratic spirit. This became manifest in the formation of a labor union and the choice of an unorthodox, liberally minded president. Iwasaburō Takano, NHK's first postwar president (1946–1949), was in fact a Marxist economist whose commitment to basic democratic rights, such as freedom of speech and religion, and gender equality, was highly progressive for his time. Under Takano, who had been an exchange student in statistics at the LMU Munich at the turn of the century, the early public broadcaster experienced a brief period of "avantgarde journalism", featuring progressive and bold programs. Radio programs were broadcasted where citizens were interviewed in the street, and political debates were aired that even took up critical topics previously considered absolute taboos, such as questioning the emperor system (Dower 1999, pp. 356–357; Matsuda 2014, pp. 61–75).

This period of experimental, one may call it rebellious, journalism soon came to an end. Following Takano's death during his ongoing tenure in 1949, Tetsurō Furukaki, a government-friendly board member, took over and quite radically readjusted what was perceived as a "dangerously communist" ideological direction of NHK. Guided by the Yoshida administration and with the SCAP's tacit approval, Furukaki executed the NHK-internal purge in 1950 and began pivoting the broadcaster's editorial stance towards a more conservative, nationalist program in line with government policies (Matsuda 2014, pp. 35–37).

Originally, the regulatory framework for public broadcaster NHK, as conceived by the US occupation, allowed for three types of independence: (1) editorial freedom, i.e., no political interference in programming content, (2) organizational freedom, i.e., specifically, autonomy in staffing decisions, and (3) budgeting freedom, i.e., no interference in budget decisions and planning. Following the dissolution of the Radio Regulatory Commission in 1952, the fragile state of this regulatory framework

became manifest. The government and the ruling party, i.e., de facto the LDP over most of the postwar era, began informal backroom consultations on the annual budget with the NHK executive board, prior to public consultations in the parliament. Thereby, the NHK budget was regularly taken hostage by the government and the LDP (Matsuda 2014, pp. 50–60).

As regards staffing, in principle, a 12-member-board of governors, appointed by the prime minister, selects the NHK chairman, accounting for a certain, indirect buffer from direct government control. In practice, however, it became routine that the chairman was de facto chosen by the prime minister and the election by the governors merely served a symbolic purpose. Unsurprisingly, as NHK was officially supervised by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, many LDP lawmakers viewed the broadcaster as the MPT's property. Thus, it was not uncommon for MPT bureaucrats to "descend" to key positions within the NHK, a customary practice called *amakudari* in Japan (literally: "descending from heaven"), comparable to revolving door politics elsewhere. A prominent case was Kichirō Ono, 11th NHK chairman from 1973 to 1976, who had been a ministry bureaucrat during the war and a close comrade of Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka (1972–1974). When it became public that Ono had visited Tanaka's home, who had been released on bail in an ongoing trial due to the Lockheed bribery scandal (1976), Ono had to resign in a first large-scale NHK scandal (Ousaka 2014, pp. 130–133).

4.3 Unbroken continuities: the kisha club system

While attempts at establishing a state-neutral regulatory framework for the media in postwar Japan were unsuccessful, other institutions of press-politics relationship persisted, first and foremost the so-called "kisha club system". The kisha clubs, literally reporters' clubs or press clubs, originated in the early Meiji period (1868–1912) when Japan carried out reforms transforming the country into a nation state following Western models. In the beginning, the kisha clubs were mere waiting rooms for journalists at major state institutions where they received official announcements. As the newspapers' economic strength and their influence on public opinion grew, the government realized that instead of advancing a press-politics antagonism through repressive laws and censorship, cooptation would be a better means of control. Under Prime Minister Tarō Katsura (2nd cabinet, 1908–1911) the reporters' clubs were actively upgraded into comfortable, fully equipped and serviced office spaces, all provided by the government, i.e., the taxpayer ultimately. These amenities were meant to "encourage not only increased but more sympathetic coverage" (Huffman 1997, p. 352). Some characteristic features of the postwar kisha clubs, i.e., their exclusive membership and close reporter-source ties, were already observed at that early stage. In the course of the totalitarian mobilization for the war, following the general overhaul of the press landscape between 1938 and 1942 (see Chap. 3), the clubs underwent a profound structural reorganization: The number of clubs were limited to one club per ministry and the members per club were reduced, excluding the trade and small newspapers. During the wartime years the reporters' clubs eventually came to represent an integral part of the state's propaganda apparatus (T. Yamamoto 1989, p. 387).

In the postwar years, the kisha clubs successfully escaped reform by the US occupation authorities. The Japan Newspaper Publishers and Editors Association (*Nihon Shinbun Kyōkai*, in short: NSK), the umbrella organization of the clubs, repelled any criticism by claiming that the clubs served the convivial socializing of reporters, but not primarily any newsgathering activities—a rationale the NSK has upheld up to this day (Freeman 2000, pp. 145–149). The criticism the clubs faced back then and today have largely remained unchanged. It is, first of all, the limitation of membership to the major media companies in Japan, i.e., the "inside-media" mentioned in Chap. 2. Local or regional newspapers, news magazines, freelance journalists, alternative/digital media outlets and the foreign press are generally barred from the clubs and denied access to official sources. In doing so, kisha clubs constrain the free flow of information and promote a form of access journalism, blurring the boundary between journalistic objectivity and government public relations.

4.4 Kisha clubs: a "conspiracy against the public"

Referring to Adam Smith's analysis of cartel structures in the industry, Laurie Anne Freeman called the kisha club arrangements between the Japanese mainstream media and official news sources a "conspiracy against the public" (Freeman 2000, pp. 163–164). The clubs are criticized for undermining editorial independence as the club media build collaborative relationships with their official sources and their fellow club members. For the clubs usually develop a life of their own. The media companies' reporters are permanently dispatched to the clubs, i.e., often for a period of two to three years, if not longer, during which they spend more time with state officials and peers from other media than with their own company's colleagues.

The relationship-building between sources and reporters does not come by chance but is implicitly desired. Having an exclusive, close, and reliable "pipe" (used in Japanese in the meaning of "communication channel", generally in official context) benefits both the individual journalist for their career advancement as well as their dispatching media organization as it gives them the edge over their competition. Thus, it is not uncommon for reporters (and media executives) to have dinner with the prime minister, party leaders or agency heads, have Mahjong sessions together or visit them at home (Minami 2020, pp. 124–127; Sunakawa 2016, pp. 114–115).

Being a designated club member comes with a lot of "responsibilities" towards the handling of information structured through rules and sanctions. Noteworthy are the so-called "blackboard agreements" (*kokuban kyōtei*), which stipulate the timing for the release of information and excludes independent newsgathering; if this becomes an industry-wide regulation, it is known as "press agreement" (*hōdō kyōtei*), requesting media organizations, usually for a specific time frame, to refrain from individual newsgathering. This has been applied particularly in the context of sensible issues related to criminal cases, the imperial family, and foreign affairs. One key principle for press-source relationships in the kisha clubs is the equal supply of information to each club member, manifesting itself in a common practice where reporters from different media will exchange notes (*memo-awase*) after informal briefings (*kondan*) to ensure that everyone has recorded all relevant information (Freeman 2000, pp. 102–141). The information-gathering practices via the kisha clubs are consid-

ered a major reason for the notorious uniform reporting of the Japanese mainstream press: "If you were to hide the masthead, it would be virtually impossible to tell from the contents which newspaper you were reading" (T. Yamamoto 1989, p. 375).

Up to this day the kisha club system has remained one of the most contentious issues of press freedom in Japan. It has repeatedly been criticized by foreign correspondents, mainly due to its incompatibility with fundamental journalistic principles (Engesser 2007, pp. 158–170), and by international organizations, such as the NGO Reporters Without Borders, the European Commission, and the United Nations, which have raised concerns about the barriers to an unrestricted flow of information in the public interest (U.N. Human Rights Council 2017, p. 11). Domestic attempts to publicly question or even reform the system have been met with fierce resistance, in fact by the inside-media themselves, for instance when the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) aimed at opening up the press clubs during their tenure (2009–2012) (Nakano 2015, p. 207). This illustrates very well that the narrative of the Japanese media as "captives of the kisha club system" falls short. As a matter of fact, the legacy media have always been and remain beneficiaries of the press club system. The same goes for the political elite. Neither the ruling party LDP, nor the state agencies, nor the inside-media themselves display any interest of changing the status quo as they believe, at bottom, that the system serves rather than harms them. The actually deprived ones are the public, who are dished up a bland news product filtered by self-censorship, tabooing, and agenda-cutting (Buchmeier 2022; Okumura et al. 2021; Snow 2020). It is no wonder that one of the major taboos in Japanese public discourse is the existence and the workings of the kisha clubs themselves—keeping the issue out of the public's mind is the best warrant for its persistence.

5 Changes in political communication and the mediatization of politics

5.1 The rising power of the media

Although the historically grown ties between media and politics in Japan would suggest so, it is oversimplified to portray the mainstream press and broadcasters as mere docile "lapdogs" serving state interests (Krauss and Lambert 2002; Otopalik and Schaefer 2008). In fact, major changes of government are attributed to, if not a sole, but an amplifying influence by the Japanese mass media. Such a prominent case occurred, for instance, at the beginning of the 1990s when a series of scandals hit the Miyazawa cabinet (1991–1993) and criticism by the major media outlets continued. Eventually, a decades-long LDP rule came to a (brief) pause when a coalition of opposition parties formed a new government after the national elections in 1993. In the aftermath of a historic loss for the LDP a scandal unfolded as TV Asahi, one of the major private broadcasters, was accused of having pursued an anti-LDP news coverage prior to the election (the so-called "Tsubaki scandal") (Ousaka 2014, pp. 217–221).

As a matter of fact, the foray of commercial broadcasting into political news from the 1980s (beginning with TV Asahi's News Station) and the tabloidization of political news in the 2000s (with the so-called "wide shows") strengthened the influence

of the media vis-à-vis politics (Taniguchi 2007). At the same time, a shift in the political landscape was underway since political players sought to transfer policymaking authority from the state bureaucracy to elected politicians. This macropolitical transformation expanded the need for politicians to be visible and presentable, came hand in hand with the above-mentioned changes in political news formats, and paved the way for a new generation of increasingly communication-savvy politicians. This "mediatization" of politics required new communication strategies by political players as it entailed both new chances and risks (Kabashima and Steel 2010; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999).

5.2 A new generation of politicians: Koizumi and Abe

The 2000s saw the rise of a new politician who became the personification of a media-savvy, telegenic politician, Jun'ichirō Koizumi, Japanese Prime Minister from 2001 to 2006. Koizumi did not only frequently appear on television, but did so in all sorts of human-interest settings portraying him as an outspoken, unconventional guy with good character and cool looks. The orchestration of his media appearances and political communication strategies soon earned the reputation of being so elaborate and winning that his way of doing politics was coined the "Koizumi theater" (*koizumi gekijō*). Koizumi benefitted from a television format on the commercial broadcasters, the "wide shows", soft news infotainment programs, that were presenting a mix of entertainment and politics and that were just too delighted by a political personality who could bridge both (Kabashima and Steel 2010, pp. 61–85; Taniguchi 2007).

The first tenure by his successor Shinzō Abe (2006–2007), in contrast, was an unfortunate one, not only in terms of political communication. Although he was quite popular with voters at the beginning, his administration lost its centripetal forces very soon. By ignoring part of the etiquette of the government's kisha club[9], he alienated the club reporters, their relationship turned sour and, from then on, Abe could not count on their sympathetic reporting anymore. One scandal followed another, cabinet officials resigned, his agriculture minister committed suicide amidst an ongoing political funding scandal, and when commercial broadcaster TBS revealed that there had been a year-long series of faulty documentation of citizens' pensions, Abe ultimately resigned (Ousaka 2014, pp. 302–308) (for Abe's more successful second tenure, see Chap. 6).[10]

5.3 Suga and the "pancake effect"

The dynamics in which the mainstream media raise and drop key political players are at times dizzying. Following Abe's resignation after his second tenure in 2020,

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[9] Abe ignored the principle of treating all kisha club media equally as he favored some, which was not well received at that time. He resumed this favoritism in his second tenure (2012–2020) when conditions in the overall media environment had drastically changed and, in the end, he managed to mobilize the national-conservative press for his agenda.

[10] The official reason for Abe's resignation was a bad health condition.

LDP infighting for his succession unfolded. Victorious in this party-internal rivalry was Yoshihide Suga, who had been Abe's right-hand man over a record-long tenure and a promising candidate for ensuring continuity in policymaking. Neither known for his charisma or eloquence nor coming with the pedigree of an influential political family, a crucial condition for success in Japanese politics, Suga was seen by many as lacking public appeal. These concerns quickly proved unwarranted as the inside-media initiated a complaisant news campaign about Suga and his personal background. Except for his loyal role as cabinet secretary to ex-Prime Minister Abe, the Japanese public and international allies had known little about Suga. But now it was widely circulated, as an unequivocal human-interest story, that Suga came from a strawberry farmer's family in the Northeastern Akita prefecture, that he was a hardworking person, and that he loved eating pancakes. Images of Suga enjoying pancakes went viral, and to a large part of the electorate, he was henceforth known as the "pancake uncle" (*pankēki ojisan*). Not that this label would have derogated from Suga's competency as the country's political leader, quite the contrary: His administration started off with a record-high approval rate of 62%[11], a rate Abe's long-term government had only reached during its best times. Very soon, however, Suga's approval rate began to plummet as media coverage turned critical due to what was perceived as ill-suited pandemic policies and an inappropriate timing for hosting Olympic Games the public had widely lost their appetite for. Besides, a major reason for Suga's falling from grace was seen in his inapt political communication: Evasive statements and monosyllabic explanations at press conferences eventually had even the most lenient reporters' patience wane (Maeda 2021). In the end, the "pancake effect" had only been short-lived.

6 Restrictive media politics in the 2010s under Abe

6.1 Creating a climate of silence: tightening legislation and intimidating the media

It might have been Shinzō Abe's bitter lessons from his first, unsuccessful tenure (2006–2007) that made him aware of the media's role in promoting and shaking up governments. After all, Abe had experienced both: touted as the "prince of the political world" (*seikai no purinsu*) at the beginning, his administration was soon thereafter torpedoed by permanent unfavorable coverage. At any rate, he returned to power in December 2012, determined not to repeat the same mistakes and instead this time push through an ambitious political agenda. After years of sluggish growth and a devastating nuclear disaster, Abe set out to rebuild both the economy and the nation's morals. What is more, he planned to revise Japan's "peace constitution", expand the country's military[12] authority and tie it more closely to US operations, an undertaking which would meet fierce resistance from large parts of the public

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[11] For approval rates please refer to: https://www.nhk.or.jp/senkyo/shijiritsu/. Retrieved August 30, 2024.

[12] Officially, Japan does not maintain a military, but a "self-defense force". Calling it a "military" in public is considered a taboo.

(Heinrich and Vogt 2017; Hughes et al. 2021; Pugliese and Patalano 2020). Being aware of the public opposition he would face, Abe knew about the media's key role in shaping public opinion, so he chose to rein them in. This started with the enactment of the State Secrecy Law, officially the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets (2013/2014), which envisaged up to ten years of incarceration for whistleblowing information related to public safety, defense, and diplomacy. Critics noted that the secrecy law was too vague in its definition of what information were designated exactly as protected "state secrets". Although the government claimed that it did not plan to apply the strict penalties of the secrecy law to journalists, a chilling effect for journalistic investigations was expected (U.N. Human Rights Council 2017, p. 19).

Next to constricting the legal environment for journalism, the Abe administration started to tighten the grip on the media by initiating a wave of personnel changes and prompting editorial conformity. In public broadcaster NHK, chairman and members of the governors' board were replaced with persons close to Abe. Critically-minded newscasters both on NHK and other television broadcasters were ousted; formerly informative, successful television formats, such as Close-Up Gendai on NHK, were "restarted" as more harmless versions and moved from prime time to late-night slots; other programs were discontinued altogether. The so-called "Orange Book" became an internal editorial guideline for NHK's international broadcasting that regulated the way sensitive issues, such as historical issues, should be addressed (e.g., the Nanjing Massacre, the so-called "comfort women", the Yasukuni Shrine, etc.). This also applied to territorial disputes with neighboring countries, and the situation at the damaged Fukushima power plant (Kingston 2017; McNeill 2017).

The government followed a carrot-and-stick approach: On the one hand, Abe made it a custom to have regular dinner with media executives and political reporters to share information and explain his administration's view of things (Sunakawa 2016, pp. 114–115); on the other, it became a habit that government officials summoned media executives or sent complaints to news companies requesting immediate remedy. These forms of intimidation were not limited to the Japanese media, but were also targeted at the foreign press, domestic and international scholars, artists, and civil society groups (Kingston 2023; Mulgan 2017; U.N. Human Rights Council 2017, p. 17). One worrying climax was reached in February 2016 when Communications Minister Sanae Takaichi publicly stated that the government may suspend television broadcasters' licence in case their reporting would not adhere to "political neutrality", as stipulated in Article 4 of the Broadcast Act (Yamada 2023). In fact, Article 174 of the Act theoretically allows the government to do so if it deems the principle of "political neutrality" violated. Despite officials repeatedly stressing that a licence suspension had never been applied in practice and the minister's comments should be seen as a mere statement of law, these remarks were considered to reinforce modes of self-censorship and curb public discourse.

6.2 Light and shade of the Abe tenure

In the more recent history of media politics in Japan, the Abe years can be considered a dismal peak of illiberal politics. Abe's treatment of the media needs to be

evaluated in the overall political context: After the 2012 change of government the opposition parties were hopelessly weakened; within the ruling party LDP, voices critical of Abe had been silenced, too; and the once proud and highly qualified bureaucracy was tamed due to institutional changes by the Abe government that centralized the political power within the cabinet. Concerning the media, as we have seen, throughout postwar Japan the legacy media and politics had a relatively close relationship held together by a tacit understanding that both sides were ultimately benefitting from each other. While a certain level of criticism by the media had been acceptable, there had always been certain untouchable issues, but at times the media would show their teeth and contribute to an eventual change of government. On the other hand, politics, particularly the LDP, has regularly attempted to keep the media in check, but in varying degrees, depending on the respective party leadership. At the end of the day, however, there was a common understanding that an equilibrium between media and politics prioritizing consensus-seeking over open conflict was desirable. The Abe administration broke with this understanding. Instead, while patronizing particular, national-conservative media, such as the Yomiuri Shimbun and the Sankei Shimbun, it advanced a repressive public climate by means of blatant and strategic media intimidation. This resulted in an overall harmless, but increasingly divisive public discourse, and further encouraged extremist voices at the fringes (Merklejn and Wiślicki 2020; Nakano 2017; Schäfer 2022).

On a more positive note, in hindsight, the Abe tenure has perhaps also revealed a remarkable resilience of the Japanese media and democracy. After all, Abe's military legislation triggered the country's largest public protests since the 1960s. And although there were unprecedented levels of political interventions against the media, particularly NHK and the Asahi Shimbun, we witnessed more media headwinds for Abe from the second half of his tenure, i.e., from 2017 onwards. Several scandals were leaked, most prominently the Moritomo scandal[13], and these continued to make headlines over an extended period of time. This can be seen as what Kingston called the "Asahi's revenge", a counterploy by the Asahi Shimbun which had severely suffered under an anti-Asahi campaign orchestrated by the pro-Abe media and the government from around 2014 (Kingston 2018). None of the innumerable scandals, notwithstanding, could effectively bring Abe's cabinet down, but eventually his tenure came to an end in 2020 amidst falling approval rates due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Liff 2021).

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[13] In the Moritomo scandal, government-owned real estate was sold to a private school operator, Moritomo Gakuen, for only 14% of the estimated land price. Abe's wife Akie was named honorary principal of the elementary school planned on that land. Moreover, Moritomo Gakuen turned out to be an ultra-nationalist organization, for instance, having students recite the Imperial Rescript on Education from the Meiji period.

7 The advent of a new age: digitization, artificial intelligence, and the rise of social media

7.1 Silent, but rigorous: the media landscape's transition to the digital sphere

As we have seen, Japan's media politics historically developed under the premise of close press-politics relationships. At the same time, communication policies reinforced these close connections of the mainstream media with the political establishment. Although the postwar regime change under the banner of democratization came along with a realignment of norms and values, ties between the media and politics have largely remained unaltered in their underlying structures. These close ties have persisted based on institutional design, legal frameworks, and informal arrangements. Attempts to introduce modes of an independent media governance have failed: Be it the formation of a third-party media regulator in the 1950s, the liberalization of the kisha clubs under the DPJ government, or a revision of Article 4 of the Broadcast Act, none of these were successful.

Nevertheless, it seems that silent, but rigorous change is underway in the landscape of media and politics. This transformation is not prompted by any of those players involved but is brought about by technological disruption. Although the Japanese media industry initially appeared relatively immune to the disruptive effects of digitization, particularly due to traditional sales structures (Villi and Hayashi 2017), we now witness an accelerating erosion of the legacy media's old business models. Since 2017 the Japanese newspaper market has annually lost a circulation of more than two million copies. This is tantamount to the disappearance of a newspaper of the scale of the Mainichi Shimbun every year. From their peak in 1997, when approximately 54 million copies were daily sold, circulation figures have almost halved as they now stand at 28.6 million (2023)[14]. Digital subscriptions have so far been completely inadequate in offsetting the losses of print copies. The commercial broadcasters, as well, have suffered a significant decline in advertising revenues for television which, again, they are not able to compensate with online advertising (Tōyōkeizai Shinpōsha 2023, pp. 202–205). Public broadcaster NHK has had to stomach yearly budget reductions since 2020 and is expected to lose more budget as the licence fee was reduced in October 2023 following public and political pressure. In short, the once powerful inside-media are facing an unprecedented challenge to their existing economic foundation.

To their own detriment, the legacy media have been slow in embracing digital technology thus far. Remarkably, international tech giants like Google (with YouTube), Netflix, Twitter, and TikTok have made successful inroads into the Japanese media landscape, posing a significant challenge to domestic players. Particularly among younger demographics, there is a notable preference for these new alternatives over traditional media services. Furthermore, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2023), approximately two thirds of Japanese users (65%) obtain news through aggregator platforms such as Yahoo! Japan or LINE NEWS, underscoring the increasing influence of tech platforms as

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[14] Figures according to data by the Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association.

gateways to news. At the same time, the direct connection between traditional news brands and customers fades. This is even more dramatic for an information environment where people do not have a strong loyalty to news media to begin with (Hayashi 2018).

7.2 Government policies for digital platforms and artificial intelligence

Historically, Japan has taken an open, welcoming stance towards new technologies. This can be derived from, amongst others, the absence of technology-critical concerns by an absolutist ideology, such as a monotheistic religion, as well as from its relative laggard status in global geopolitics, be it vis-à-vis China in the premodern age and vis-à-vis the Western nations in the modern age. The way how Japanese people embrace new technologies, particularly robots, is often said to be reflected in a plethora of positive narratives in popular culture. Interestingly, when it comes to the future role of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) in society, Japanese people consider their government a key player in promoting and shaping these developments. This public perception arguably also derives from the salience of new technologies on the Japanese government's policy agenda, as seen with initiatives from Shinzo Abe's "Society 5.0" to Fumio Kishida's vision of "Digital Garden Cities" (Hohendanner et al. 2023; Spremberg 2023).

Confronted with the country's deficiencies in digitization, particularly in state administration, the Japanese government has made the digital transformation one of its top priorities in recent years. In 2020, a first "Minister of Digital Transformation" was appointed and, in 2021, a Digital Agency was formed to help reorganize ministries, responsibilities, and policymaking processes (Schaede and Shimizu 2022; R. Yamamoto and Iversen 2024). As part of Japan's efforts to regulate digital platforms more effectively, the government established the Headquarters for Digital Market Competition (DMCH) in 2019. The priority of this initiative for the Japanese government is underlined as the chair is held by the chief cabinet secretary who works directly under the prime minister. The formation of a cross-sectional, inter-ministry organization dealing with digital markets is part of a broader global trend of governments seeking to regulate the activities of digital platforms more effectively, particularly in response to concerns about market concentration, data privacy, and consumer protection (Kantei 2019).

One major legislative outcome of this initiative was the Act on Improving Transparency and Fairness of Digital Platforms (TFDPA), in short: the Transparency Act, in 2020/2021. The act aims to prevent anticompetitive behavior by digital platforms, such as abusing their market dominance to unfairly disadvantage competitors or restrict consumer choice. It also seeks to improve transparency in the operations of digital platforms, including their algorithms, terms of service, and data usage policies. Furthermore, the TFDPA aims at addressing concerns about unfair contract terms imposed by digital platforms on users and businesses; and it plans to regulate contractual practices to ensure fairness and protect the interests of all parties involved. Thereby, the act proposes a framework of oversight mechanisms or regulatory authorities to enforce its provisions and monitor the activities of digital platforms. The TFDPA does not take a conventional, prescriptive approach, but only

provides a rather general regulatory framework which builds on businesses' "voluntary and proactive efforts", thus representing a "co-regulation" approach (METI 2021).

As tech firms' practices are now facing increased scrutiny both in the US and the European Union (Gerken and Kleinman 2024), Japan's regulators also seem more determined to take action against distortions of competition by digital platforms. In April 2024, the Japanese Fair Trade Commission (FTC) initiated an administrative action against Google, flagging the tech company's employment of strategies that restricted local rival Yahoo Japan's capacity to compete in targeted search advertisements. The FTC's administrative action against Alphabet, Google's parent company, was a first and came with no penalty, however, the regulator will monitor the situation closely and expects the company to make improvements (Mochizuki 2024).

Against the background of an escalating worldwide debate on advanced artificial intelligence systems, Japan has taken a proactive stance in promoting AI regulation. This is seen with the Hiroshima AI Process, initiated at the G7 Hiroshima Summit in May 2023, which aims at shaping inclusive governance for generative AI. The process focuses on promoting safe, secure, and trustworthy AI through international collaboration. It culminates in the Hiroshima AI Process Comprehensive Policy Framework, the world's first international effort toward this goal. This framework comprises four pillars: analyzing risks and opportunities of generative AI, establishing guiding principles for all AI actors, setting a code of conduct for organizations developing advanced AI systems, and fostering project-based cooperation for responsible AI development (European Commission 2023; Government of Japan 2024).

7.3 The influence of social media on public discourse

How the digital transformation and advancements in artificial intelligence are going to play out in the mid- and long-term and how they will affect the political landscape remains to be seen. At this point, however, we can observe a remarkable trend in political discourse in the public sphere that possibly suggests if not a dismantling, but a weakening of the cartel-like structures that Freeman (2000) once described. Namely, the influence of social media on public discourse is notably rising. The pressure built up by discourses in the digital sphere more often results in media coverage by the mainstream media. In the pre-digital era, the major media had the undisputed authority in setting the agenda of public discourse. They also exerted enormous influence on cutting the agenda, i.e., keeping unwelcome issues off the news agenda (Buchmeier 2020b, 2022; Haarkötter and Nieland 2023). Now, however, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the legacy media to keep ignoring certain issues while these are vigorously debated in the digital sphere. This goes particularly for the platform X (formerly Twitter) used by approximately one in two Japanese. Even if the initial scoop does not originally stem from social media, social media helps to amplify and sustain attention on specific issues if users keep discussions going.

There have been a few prominent cases only in recent years where the power of the digital public sphere became manifest. This can play out in ways both conducive and detrimental to democratic deliberation.

Cases of political computational propaganda on Twitter have demonstrated that social media platforms are increasingly becoming a considerable force in swaying public opinion or even election outcomes. Starting from the early 2010s, political bots were repeatedly used on Twitter to promote a reactionary, (ultra-)nationalist agenda, amplifying racist, misogynist, and xenophobic voices. As the 2021 scandal of the Twitter account Dappi revealed, it was not only bots, but in fact internet companies commissioned by factions of the ruling party LDP who were disseminating agitating messages and attacks on (female) opposition politicians (Fuchs and Schäfer 2021; Schäfer 2022; Schäfer et al. 2017).

In some cases, on the other hand, social media discourses have contributed to the revelation of political wrongdoing and collusion. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe in July 2022, political ties between his party LDP and a religious cult, the Unification Church, were revealed. At the beginning, the mainstream media were reiterating official information that there was no political motive behind the assassination while avoiding to openly call the religious organization by name. But as the pressure from the outside-media grew, the inside-media did not have any other choice than picking up the critical link between the LDP and the Unification Church. Paradoxically, this led to a competition among the mainstream media to outdo each other in investigating the issue journalistically. Ultimately, Prime Minister Kishida's approval rate sharply dropped as he insisted on proceeding with a state funeral for Abe, whose legacy was seen more and more questionable against the backdrop of innumerable citizens aggrieved by the cult's fraudulent practices (McCormack 2022).

Another case was the 2023–2024 slush fund scandal that would unfold into one of the biggest corruption scandals in decades. Irregularities in the accounting of LDP fundraising parties were a well-known issue in Japan's political establishment. Originally, Kyōdō News had reported on this issue as early as March 2005 when this practice was already well established in the Seiwakai faction (the "Abe faction") under then-leader Yoshirō Mori (Kakizaki 2024). More recently, the issue was reported in November 2022 by the Shimbun Akahata, a newspaper affiliated with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP). From there, it took another year that the issue became salient in the mainstream media. What had been a neglected news item by a press agency at the outset and then reappeared as a report in a fringe media, eventually made its way onto the prime stage of national discourse, causing repercussions that would shake the very foundations of the long-ruling LDP. With every new bit of critical revelations, members of the Kishida cabinet resigned, party executives were replaced, and major factions—"parties within the party"—announced to disband (Tomisaki 2024).

As we have seen in recent years, just as elsewhere (Kruse et al. 2018; Noble 2018; Pond and Lewis 2019), algorithm-driven discourses in Japan's digital sphere can turn out in ambivalent ways: On the one hand, they may create problematic, destructive spaces where misinformation and hate speech proliferate, at times driven by (covert) political forces. If amplified and left uncontrolled, these discourse spaces

may over time result in rising political cynicism and an erosion of trust in democratic institutions (Kerbel 2018 [1999]; Schäfer 2023). On the other hand, the digital sphere may as well work as a much-needed corrective to hegemonic discourses that help sustain specific discourses by holding up pressure on the traditional, authoritative media to keep controversial, but relevant issues on the public agenda.

8 The media's role in Japanese politics: past, present, and future

Having gone through roughly a century of media politics in Japan has demonstrated that condensing the mainstream media's role into a neat formula appears like squaring the circle. What becomes manifest, however, is that media and politics in Japan have always been deeply intertwined. Yet, despite their closeness to state institutions, the Japanese media's positioning vis-à-vis the state has been highly ambivalent contingent upon the respective historical, political, and economic context. Yes, there have been those phases when debates on specific topics were more or less uniform, with narrow boundaries to what was deemed appropriate to be expressed in public. On the other hand, we have seen those cases when the seal was broken and the mainstream media started a bidding competition on who reports more and more details about political misconduct or critical state affairs, in the end forcing prime ministers to act or even step down. Perhaps the former case might be the more common one, but nonetheless it would be an oversimplification to portray the Japanese media as mere "docile lapdogs" (Krauss and Lambert 2002; Otopalik and Schaefer 2008).

8.1 The media's elusive role in politics: trickster, coconspirator, or agent of change?

In fact, pinning down the Japanese media's role has been a decades-long endeavour. In an attempt at reflecting the ambivalent, contradictory nature of the mainstream media in Japanese politics, Susan Pharr once proposed the "trickster" metaphor. Media as trickster do both: They contribute to maintaining the status quo and, at the same time, help changing it (Pharr 1996). Based on her study of the kisha clubs and the institutional limitations of the Japanese media, Laurie Anne Freeman put forward a critical metaphor: the media as "coconspirator" "in the sense of an open collaboration between certain actors in society, who, in pursuing their own interests, intentionally or unintentionally harm other key segments of society" (Freeman 2000, p. 163). The harmed segment in this perspective is the public. In his study of NHK, Ellis Krauss highlighted the stabilizing role of the public broadcaster as it helped add legitimacy to the state and its institutions, thereby fostering democracy in a tumultuous postwar Japan (Krauss 2000, pp. 258–272). Referring to evidence from Japan and South Korea, Celeste Arrington points to the puzzling workings of a homogeneous media environment which, ironically, at times can be advantageous for civil society groups once their concerns are taken up by the mainstream media, an intriguing phenomenon she calls the "access paradox" (Arrington 2017). From time to time, the inside-media display their verve in (un-)covering the latest political scandal in all (surgical) detail. It is, however, hardly justified to believe that the

Japanese media's obsession with scandals is an expression of journalistic ideals or even subversive potential. Extensive scandal reporting is an established, common practice in Japanese media politics. It can be considered a social ritual for assuring oneself of societal values and norms, but what is possibly more, it is a media product which promises high viewing rates and sustained audience interest. In short, scandals sell, and through their elaborate production Japanese media, ultimately, help perpetuating the status quo (Prusa 2024, pp. 107–112). No matter how we are trying to define the media's role in Japanese politics, we have seen that their role is highly contingent upon the respective political leadership, the (policy) issues at stake, and the politico-economic conditions at the time.

This is why it is illuminative to take the media landscape's historical trajectory into account. For it highlights the varying contingencies the media have gone through. After the war, structural continuities prevailed. In the decades to follow, initiatives to establish modes of independent media governance failed, and political intrusions repeatedly occurred, while geopolitical affairs indirectly influenced the development of press freedom. From around the 1990s the mediatization of politics set in, which saw a relative rise of the media's power vis-à-vis politics. In the 2010s news journalism in Japan had to stomach a backlash under Abe's restrictive media policies. The most recent influences on media politics arguably derive from technological changes in the media landscape.

The lens of media independence may perhaps not be the right framework to explore Japanese media, to begin with. This may be perplexing as a common understanding of liberal democracies rests on the belief in independent media as a normative goal. One may argue, however, that Japanese media have never really striven for independence and, instead, have rather actively desired to be close to those in power. As James Huffman aptly remarks: "Close ties of this sort [between media and politics, added by author] should not surprise us. After all, the Japanese journalistic tradition had less to do with independence than with influence" (Huffman 1997, p. 354). Indeed, one can view the Japanese mainstream media as integral part of the political establishment pursuing their own agenda. This means, first and foremost, they are—except for NHK—commercial enterprises whose primary interest is a maximization of profit. With William Niskanen (1968) one may state that even public media are not immune to the pursuit of profits as they seek, if not a maximization of profit, then a maximization of budget. Ultimately, it is about institutional survival.

8.2 Quo vadis, media democracy?

Throughout most of their history, Japanese media have been doing well in keeping an equilibrium with political power. On the one hand, they were able to grow economically, often thanks to and not despite the government (see subsidies, reduced consumption tax, exclusive access to official information); on the other, they were aware of their influence to make and break governments, which, at times, accelerated the downfall of past administrations. In this sense, they are not merely the lens through which to view society, but rather need to be seen as active shapers of the political landscape (Krauss 2000, pp. 241–272). This influence became possible as

they were attracting the masses to a degree that enabled them to function as successful commercial enterprises. The costs that came with this strategy was an oftentimes bland, tabloid-like news environment presenting sensationalist and oversimplified content (particularly on private television). And while it is true that their reporting has occasionally been unflattering towards the government, the question would be in how far they have fulfilled the other democratic key role of providing a forum for pluralistic deliberation of relevant societal issues in the Habermasian sense (Habermas 1996, p. 359). In this regard, we do find some shortcomings. Sensitive, complex, and controversial topics are often avoided in the mainstream discourse with the result that relevant societal, economic and political issues remain unaddressed (Buchmeier 2023; Kushner 2024).

On a positive note, Japan's consensual discourse environment[15], while generally emphasizing conservative values and eschewing progressive issues on the one hand, has absorbed extremist standpoints on the other. As a result, contrary to many other contemporary liberal democracies worldwide, Japanese democracy has (so far) avoided more prevalent forms of political extremism or radicalization. From this point of view, the Japanese media environment has had a cohesive, integrative effect. Overall, this may have also contributed to the country's positive image as a stable and reliable partner in international relations.

Nevertheless, the unstoppable rise of digital media and algorithm-driven news feeds rather foreshadows a further fragmentation of the public sphere with all its cataclysmic, divisive effects for society (Sunstein, 2018). Challenges in Japan are as well seen in high levels of public indifference towards the media and current affairs (Hayashi 2018). Apathy, disenchantment, and cynicism towards politics are on the rise, most vividly manifested in steadily declining voter turnouts, raising anew the universal question of how news journalism, this time in a hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2017), can constructively foster political efficacy in times of seemingly overwhelming national and global crises.

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[15] It is pointed out that, in recent years, there have been tendencies of rising polarization and editorial partisanship among the Japanese mainstream media (Hayashi 2018; Merklejn and Wiślicki 2020). It is also known that the degree of uniformity in newspaper reports varies depending on the news issue and time period, as seen for instance with reporting on nuclear power (Weiss 2021).

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